wild things

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Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

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Gale "Buck" Cleven, Harry Crosby, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal, Joseph "Bubbles" Payne, Neil "Chick" Harding, Curtis Biddick, Ken Lemmons

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wild things

by signifier

Summary

He takes the final step, lifts the lantern to flood the empty station with light, and sees a man laying on his stable floor.
He's brunette, sweating, breathing unsteadily. There's blood wiped messily on his forehead, down his neck. Half laying, half sitting up against the stack of haybales Buck keeps at the bottom of this station, he's got one bloody hand pressed to his right thigh, which is caked with crimson. His other hand rests wearily on the Colt that's tucked into the waistband of his pants.
Gale's heart jumps, he wishes suddenly that he really did have a rifle, but when the man sees that Buck's unarmed he raises the hand slowly, in a shaky surrender.
-
"You got a name?" Buck asks, in an attempt to distract.
The stranger swallows and takes a deep breath. "Bucky."
Buck almost pauses in his work. He scoffs and shakes his head. "I'll be damned."
"Why's that?"
"People call me Buck."
Bucky huffs out a pained laugh, which quickly devolves into a groan. When he's finished, he says, "Goddamn fate."

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The one where stablehand Gale finds outlaw John "Bucky" Egan bleeding out in his stables.

(The sequel, seven miles out of freedom town, has been posted.)

Notes

i promise to try and make this as accurate as possible to the western era, so pls ignore any inconsistencies.

See the end of the work for more notes

The Flying Fortress

Gale Cleven is sat upright in bed, listening.

A light sleeper, the smallest of sounds pulled him from the dark, and right now he swears something had moved outside. It had sounded suspiciously like heavy wood, like the stable doors that weren't far from where he sat. The doors liked to shift and shudder when the wind was high, but he couldn't hear the moaning of the gale, or the gate to the training pen rattling.

He swears to God, if it's that Crosby boy and his damn brother Bubbles trying to sneak a pet of his horses again, he's going to lose it. He'd drag them back to their mother at the grain mill, and tell her exactly what'd happen the next time he catches them sneaking around his ranch.

A loud, strangled neigh comes from the stables, followed by various snorts. The noise goes straight to his chest, and he quickly slips out of bed to pull on his boots.

The walk from his house door to the stables isn't far, but in the dead of night with nothing but his shirtsleeves to keep out the cold, the journey feels longer. He should have brought his rifle, should be willing to put the fox or stray dog that's spooking his horses down. *Next time,* he thinks. For now, he just wanted to make sure they were okay.

He slides open the heavy door, lantern in hand, and immediately the sound builds. The horses in the boxes on his left are jittery, but calm, stepping side to side. The two to his right are a little more stressed. He crosses to the Flying Fortress first, whose always been easy to calm down. He skips the empty station beside him, and holds up a hand to the next.

Boeing, Gale's favourite horse, a beautiful white thoroughbred, is fussing, kicking up onto her back legs, snorting, shaking her head.

Buck hushes her gently, brings the lantern up closer to her so she can see its only him.

There's a bloody handprint pressed to the side of Boeings neck.

Gale's blood runs cold.

It looks like whoever it belonged to had placed their hand and dragged it downwards, in an attempt to soothe the horse. Clearly, that hadn't worked out for them.

Buck grabs Boeing's reigns, keeps up a steady stream of *shh, shh, shh*, whilst his mind races.

If they were still in the stables, why hadn't they attacked him yet? He was perfectly vulnerable, and clearly he didn't have any weapons on him. Unless, whoever they were was hiding.

"You'd better come on out," he calls into the dark, "I got a rifle."

It's risky. The stranger might take that as a threat – which it was, albeit an empty one.

He waits, listening intently for any sign of movement, and he hears it. A rustle of hay to his left, the empty box beside Boeing's station.

Gale runs a hand down the horses nose and then takes slow, careful steps towards the noise. The gravel and straw crunches underneath his boots into the mud. Just as he's about to round the corner, a pained voice says:

"Don't shoot."

He takes the final step, lifts the lantern to flood the empty station with light, and sees a man laying on his stable floor.

He's brunette, sweating, breathing unsteadily. There's blood wiped messily on his forehead, down his neck. Half laying, half sitting up against the stack of haybales Buck keeps at the bottom of this station, he's got one bloody hand pressed to his right thigh, which is caked with crimson. His other hand rests wearily on the Colt that's tucked into the waistband of his pants.

Gale's heart jumps, he wishes suddenly that he really did have a rifle, but when the man sees that Buck's unarmed he raises the hand slowly, in a shaky surrender.

The stranger tips his head back against the hay, exposing his throat, and squeezes his eyes shut. He's breathing through clenched teeth, and something in Gale makes him take a step closer.

Eyes snap back to him in an instant. He looks a bit like a cornered animal, hissing and feral. To anybody else that'd be a warning sign,

but Buck couldn't help it. He always wanted the animal to feed out his hand.

"You shot?" He asks.

The man seems to think about it, lets his breathing fill the empty noise. One of the horses snorts – Buck thinks it might have been Fortress.

"Yeah," the stranger croaks.

"A'right," Buck nods, "hang tight."

-

When he returns with a basin of water, cloth, bandages, a bottle of whiskey, and a threaded needle held gently between his teeth, he half expects the man to be gone. He finds him right where he left him, though he's now definitely more on the lying down side of things.

Gale had left the lantern on the floor, careful not to let the oil spill onto the straw. He places the bowl and whiskey beside it, kneels down next to the strangers wounded leg, and takes the needle from between his teeth.

"A'right," he says for the second time, "let's see."

The man is still looking at him cautiously, and for a moment Buck doesn't think he's going to move, but with a low exhale he removes his hand from the injury.

Gale leans in, but he can't see much with the leather stuck to his skin. He sighs.

"Hope you ain't terribly fond of these pants," he says, before placing his fingers inside the ruined material and pulling. Ripping a large hole in the leather, he brushes against the wound, and the stranger hisses in pain, doubling over.

"Warn a man, would you?" He coughs.

Buck smirks.

"Would have been worse if I had," he says, and hands the man the bottle of whiskey.

The stranger takes it eagerly, uncapping it with fumbling hands before

taking a long swig. The alcohol drips down his chin, mixes with the blood on his neck, and Gale is overcome with the urge to reach up and wipe it away with his thumb at the sight.

He tells himself he's getting delirious from the lack of sleep, and focuses.

Gale wets the cloth and sets to work with wiping away the blood. His patient fidgets, tightens his hands, drinks deeper from the bottle, and mutters a whole string of curses.

Buck can see the wound now, a nasty gash that ran horizontal across the side of his thigh. It's deep, hence all the blood, but it's clean, and with stitches the man won't have any lasting injuries. He cleans the red off his hands as best as he can before dropping the cloth into the basin.

"A'right. Gonna stitch you up, and you'll be fine." He puts his hand out for the bottle.

The man must know what's coming, because he hesitates before handing it over reluctantly.

Without waiting, Buck upends the bottle on his thigh.

The poor stranger screams through his teeth, digs his hands into the dirt. Next door, Gale can hear Boeing shift unhappily.

"I know, I know," Gale comforts – though he's not sure who he's directing it to – and holds the needle in the flame of the lantern. When he's convinced it's sterile, he pulls it out. "Now, this ain't gon' feel too great."

The man takes deep breaths, jaw clenched, and shuts his eyes to lean his head back against the hay once more. He nods, and Buck gets to work.

He tries to move quickly, doesn't take any joy in the way the body beneath him trembles and groans. Pinch the skin, drive the needle through, drag. A three step motion. He's sewn enough holes in his own shirts, fixed the buckles on saddles, to know what he's doing. About halfway through, the man opens his eyes and scrambles for the whiskey bottle.

"You got a name?" Buck asks, in an attempt to distract.

The stranger swallows and takes a deep breath. “Bucky.”

Buck almost pauses in his work. He scoffs and shakes his head. “I’ll be damned.”

“Why’s that?”

“People call me *Buck*.”

Bucky huffs out a pained laugh, which quickly devolves into a groan. When he’s finished, he says, “goddamn fate.”

Gale nods, smiling. He’s almost done, now, only one or two to go.

“What’s your real name?” Bucky asks, seeming to be glad for the conversation.

“Gale,” Buck says softly. “Gale Cleven.”

A bead of sweat rolls down Bucky’s temple, joins the cocktail of whiskey and blood at the base of his neck.

“Well, I’m much obliged, Gale.”

The sound of his name in Bucky’s mouth jolts his stomach unexpectedly. He puts it down to not being used to getting called Gale. He ties off the thread, and leans down to bite the needle free with his teeth. Bucky hisses when the stitches pull, and then it’s over.

Buck dips his hands in the water, dries them on his shirt, staining it with light pink streaks. He adds the needle to the basin, and picks up the bandages.

As he’s reaching back towards the wound, Bucky grips his wrist tightly with a sticky, muddy hand. His breath hitches, and then he’s leaning to his left and throwing up all his whiskey on the stable floor. This was unsurprising, and Gale waits patiently till he’s done.

Bucky spits, moans, and leans back once more. He releases his grip on Buck’s wrist and wipes across his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You ever been shot?” Bucky asks, voice raw.

“No suh.”

“Well, don’t.”

Buck laughs softly. “I’ll try not to be.”

The hole he made in Bucky’s pants is big enough that he can get his hand inside and underneath his leg. The inner of Bucky’s thigh is unbearably warm. He wraps the bandage snugly once, twice, three times, four, before tucking it into itself and checking it won’t come loose.

Satisfied, he sits back on his feet.

“Will I live, doc?” Bucky asks.

“We’ll see,” Buck replies, and stands. He kicks mud and straw into the puddle of filth beside Bucky and then collects the basin.

“I can bring you a blanket, and a change of pants, if it suits you,” he offers.

For a moment, Bucky seems surprised, as if he wasn’t expecting to stay.

“That’d be appreciated,” he says, slowly.

Gale nods. “Some matches, too, if the light gets low.”

“Wouldn’t say no to more whiskey, if y’got it.”

Buck huffs out a laugh and starts heading back to his house, to raid his own alcohol supply.

“You got blood on your teeth,” Bucky calls after him.

The Bloody Hundreth

Chapter Summary

> He stares into the space where Bucky had laid, wondering how soon after Buck had left him that he'd gone. Would the straw still carry the fever hot heat of his skin, if he crouched down and pressed a hand to it?
>
> He feels, disappointed. Gale understands how dumb that is, but for all of five minutes he'd had someone who needed him, someone to talk to that wasn't Rosie, or a horse. Someone had gripped his hand tight and he could still feel the nails in his skin.

Chapter Notes

> thank u everyone whose shown interest in this so far! i can only hope it'll meet all ur expectations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Gale wakes, for a moment, he forgets there's a man asleep in his stables.

The events of last night rush at him like a tidal wave, and he can feel Bucky's trembling skin beneath his fingertips. He sits up, rubs his eyes and thinks about what the hell he's going to do next.

Getting so close last night had been a stupid decision. Bucky could have shot him at any moment. He could have creeped into his house and robbed him and shot him in his bed for good measure.

The fact he's still breathing sends a spark of hope up his spine.

He gets up, gets dressed, pulls his leather coat on and heads for the front door, wanting to get ahead of the situation.

As timing would have it, there's a knock at his door. He expects to find Bucky, blanket and lantern in hand with a goodbye on his tongue.

What he finds instead, is a shiny, silver star as Sheriff Harding and Deputy Rosenthal stand on his doorstep.

"Sheriff," Buck says, surprised.

“Mornin’, Buck.”

“Somethin’ wrong?” He questions, looking behind the Sheriff to gauge Rosie’s reaction.

The Sheriff could be an unrelenting bastard. He’d had a lot of outlaws hung that way, and a lot of innocent people, too. Gale didn’t dislike the fella, but he’d seen the way the widows looked at him, and you didn’t look at a man like that for no reason. The Deputy, though. Gale liked the Deputy. Rosie was good at his job, and nice enough to have earnt the respect that came with his title. When there was a problem, most people tracked down Rosie, and he found a way to fix the fuss without any bloodshed. Where the Sheriff liked violence for the sake of violence, the Deputy was the real law enforcer of the town.

Gale had spent a lot of time with Rosie when his wife, Marge, had died five years prior. He’d gone mad with grief, desperately insisting that someone had killed her, that there was no way she had just *died*. Rosie spent a year investigating the case, collecting alibi’s and making it perfectly clear to Buck that this was nobody’s fault. He’d pulled a favour with a Governor he knew from another town, had a doctor, a man named Lemmons, brought over to inspect the body and perform an autopsy.

People get sick, Lemmons had said, *it’s not your fault.*

It had taken another year after that to get to a place where Gale believed the doctor, and Rosie had been a constant friend through it all.

Now, The Deputy doesn’t look unhappy, but he gives nothing away as to what this visit might be about.

“Had the Crosby boy in my station this mornin’,” Sheriff Harding begins, “claims he saw a figure runnin’ in this direction last night.”

Gale briefly considers how Bucky had ran through the town on that leg.

“You see anythin’?” The Deputy finishes.

Buck’s not one to lie to the law, especially not to Rosie, but he doesn’t like the idea of Bucky being caught in Harding’s noose.

“Nothin’,” he says. Keep it short, simple.

“Y’sure?” Harding presses.

A dog on a hunt.

“Pretty sure, yessuh,” Buck insists.

“Mind if we come on in and check? Would hate for him to be hidin’ somewhere,” the Sheriff asks, a rhetorical question as he takes a step through the front door.

“I’d know if an outlaw was in my house,” Buck says with a disarming laugh, not moving aside.

“Buck’s a light sleeper,” Rosie offers helpfully over the Sheriff’s shoulder. Gale wonders if he can feel the static that’s building under Harding’s skin.

The Sheriff hums, already turning and looking towards the stables. Rosie gives Buck a look.

“What about in there?” Harding points. “You go in yet?”

“Was just headin’ there now,” Gale says, truthfully.

The walk to the stables feels like it takes an age. He’s not sure what he’s expecting – to find Bucky wrapped up neatly in a blanket, damning evidence that he had, indeed, seen something. He could feign shock, leave Bucky stranded, but that seems cruel after how much pain he was in last night, and he was determined to spare him from the noose. Something in him already felt loyal to Bucky. Maybe it was their names. Maybe it was because Bucky had called it fate.

“How are things, Deputy?” Buck asks as they get closer, hoping that Bucky might hear them.

“Got my hands on one of those gramophones,” Rosie says, perking up. “Y’should come and have a listen.”

“I will,” Gale says, and means it. He knows how Rosie feels about music.

The Sheriff puts his hands on the stables door.

Buck’s heart drops to his feet, and he quickly rushes forward. “Hold on there Sheriff, it gets stuck.”

He pushes himself into Harding’s space, accidentally has him back

away from the door, and then Gale's driving his own shoulder into the wood. He does it twice, that's all the warning he can give, and then he's smiling at the Sheriff and sliding the door open.

Rosie's looking at him with a subtle frown. Buck keeps his back to him.

Closest to the door on their left, a red, tennessee walking horse he called the Bloody Hundreth sneezed as the light overtook the stables. Boeing and Fortress seemed calm, shifting in their boxes as a gentle breeze carried in from outside.

The three men stepped in, and Buck listened intently for any sign that Bucky was still in his box.

Harding ran a hand up and down Hundreth's neck, muttering, before making his way down the left side of boxes, greeting the horses and investigating their stations. Gale didn't dare take his eyes off him, didn't dare glance to where Bucky had spent the night and give away the game. Deputy Rosenthal stood beside him, his hands in the pocket of his leather jacket, looking very much like a man who did not expect to find an outlaw hiding with the horses.

Reaching the end of the left row, Sheriff Harding crosses over to the right. Every step he takes sends a spark down Buck's spine. He's three boxes away…two…one.

The Sheriff places his hands on the gate, pushes, and –

"What happened to Boeing?"

Rosie's voice pulls Buck from his terror, snaps his attention to where the Deputy was stood beside the thoroughbred. When Buck said nothing, Rosie pulled a hand from his pocket and pointed to the red on her neck, stark like wine spilt in snow.

Gale's mind whirls, and he blinks.

"Skinned a hare," he offers quickly, "didn't clean all the blood from my hands. I haven't had the chance to wash her, yet."

There isn't time to check if the Deputy believes him, but when he's focusing his attention back on the Sheriff, it's over. Harding leaves the box, lets the gate swing closed, runs a hand down Boeing's nose as he peers into her station.

All of Gale's worry sinks out of his boots, and spreads across the stable floor. He's left with something else.

The Sheriff does a quick check of the empty box to the right of Boeing, and then finally greets Fortress.

"A'right," he sighs, and Buck hates him for sounding so let down. "You know where to find us." Then he's leaving the stables with a sharp *Rosenthal*.

Gale looks to his friend. Rosie's fixing him with a very, *very* odd look. Guilt settles itself comfortably between his fifth and sixth rib. Buck ignores it, just smiles and shrugs, the picture of innocence.

"Lookin' forward to hearing that music of yours," Gale says, as a way of goodbye.

The Deputy blinks, softens, and smiles. He claps Gale on the shoulder as he exits. "Be seeing you, Buck."

And then Gale's alone.

He watches the law walk away across the gravel, and then Gale crosses the stable floor and shoves open the gate of Bucky's station.

It's completely empty.

Not just of the body, but of the lantern, and the blanket, and the whiskey. Both pairs of pants are gone.

He stares into the space where Bucky had laid, wondering how soon after Buck had left him that he'd gone. Would the straw still carry the fever hot heat of his skin, if he crouched down and pressed a hand to it?

He feels, disappointed. Gale understands how dumb that is, but for all of five minutes he'd had someone who needed him, someone to talk to that wasn't Rosie, or a horse. Someone had gripped his hand tight and he could still feel the nails in his skin.

Alone, again, he thinks bitterly. He doesn't know why he expected anything else.

There's a sharp whistle from up high.

Buck frowns, cranes his neck to look up, and there's Bucky, wearing his pants, balanced on a beam in the rafters.

Something warm spreads itself along the left side of Gale's chest. Laughter flows through him like a dam.

"How the *hell* did you get up there?" He questions, grinning.

"I like heights," Bucky says simply.

"How the hell you gon get *down*, idjit?" Buck chastises.

That wipes the smile from Bucky's face, but Buck only laughs harder.

-

That night, they share a bottle of whiskey over a controlled fire they start in the stables.

Gale's done this before, when he first got Boeing. She was so beautiful, he was convinced someone was going to steal her. He'd spent her first night sat against the gate to her box, warming his feet by a fire.

Buck had changed the bandage on Bucky's thigh, blood was spreading through the fabric after his climb, and this time he'd stuck around when the violence was done with.

"Where'd you hide my things?" He questions the strange man.

Bucky's face lights up in a grin, and he puts down the bottle to push himself to his feet. It takes some effort, Gale regrets asking, but then Bucky's limping to the haybales in his box. Buck has to lean back to see around the fence from where they set the fire, and he watches as Bucky shifts some of the straw. There, buried neatly, is everything Gale had left him with. The Colt lay on top of the blanket.

"Heard you comin'," Bucky explains as he shuffles back to the fire. He sits with difficulty, and Buck can see the sweat that's starting to line his face.

"Hoped you would," Gale says, choosing to leave the fact Bucky had left his gun on the ground when he'd climbed into the rafters unsaid.

"You're a wonderful liar. You could go on the road with it," Bucky jokes.

Buck smiles and reaches over to take the whiskey. The mouth of the bottle is warm, and he tries not to think about why.

"That Sheriff of yours ain't very smart, is he?" Bucky continues.

“No suh, that he ain’t,” Gale laughs.

“Deputy’s not too hot, either.”

“Hey, Rosie’s a *good* man,” Gale defends, and Bucky holds his hands up in surrender.

For a while they sit in silence. Bucky reaches over to pull the bottle from Gale’s hands, and his fingertips are warm when they brush his skin.

“Why’d they call you Buck?” Bucky asks. He’s leant back on his elbows, face golden from the flames.

“It’s, uh, a horses name,” Buck begins. “Used to have a horse named Buck, on account of he’d do that to just about everyone that tried to ride him. When I tried, he was calm as anything.”

“You often ride feral horses?” Bucky teases.

“He weren’t feral, just…misunderstood. He was a good horse.”

“Just like the Deputy’s a *good* man.” There was an underlying tone of doubt in Bucky’s voice, that Gale found he didn’t like very much.

“Why’d they call you Bucky?” Buck deflects, a parallel of their first meeting.

“Oh, some guy I used to know said I looked like a Bucky,” he waves a dismissive hand.

“What’s *your* real name?” Gale wonders aloud.

Bucky just smiles, and drinks.

Chapter End Notes

if you enjoyed leave a comment, or come yell at me on tumblr @sig-nifier

John Egan

Chapter Summary

> Buck knows what the wildfire that lives inside Bucky is, now. It's chaos. It's mischief and havoc. It's an easy grin with lightning at it's edges. Right in this moment, the heat makes him nervous, but Goddamn if it doesn't feel good to be warm.

Chapter Notes

> this one's long. i had way too much fun writing it and it got away from me. hope u enjoy reading as much as i enjoyed writing!
>
> an update on the writing process: at the moment i've been coming home from work, banging out a chapter nd uploading it at roughly 9-10pm london uk time. i'm going to keep to this as much as i can! if for whatever reason a chapter isn't out daily like it has been so far, don't worry, the chapter probably just got away from me, and i didn't have time to finish it before i fell asleep.
>
> thank u all for ur overwhelming support

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning, Gale takes two cups of coffee down to the stables. His is already half drunk by the time he's brewed another and carried it down the gravel path.

He must have woken Bucky with the horses fussing when he opened the door, because the man emerges from his box, squinting in the daylight. He leans against the beam that separates his and Boeing's gates. His weight is shifted to his left leg, but there's more colour in his face, he certainly looks more alive than he has the past two nights, if you ignored the blood painted on his skin.

"Mornin'," he says thickly.

"Mornin'," Gale repeats. He hands over the mug, and Bucky takes it with eager hands.

Oddly, he's not sure what to say. What do you say, to the potential outlaw that was sleeping in your stables? Not that Gale thought Bucky *was* an outlaw, he'd been nothing but pleasant to him, but there was the unmistakable fact that he'd been shot, and innocent men didn't

hide from the law.

Boeing takes the moment to press her face into the side of Gale's head, and his attention quickly shifts to her. Whilst he's petting her nose, Bucky slinks back into his box.

"You got somewhere you're goin'?" Gale calls after him.

The response is slow. "…Goin'?"

Buck leaves Boeing's side. She's not happy about it. When he rounds the corner, Bucky is on the floor once more, the blanket thrown carelessly over his legs.

"Like a home?" Gale prompts.

Bucky shrugs, looking content as anything laying amongst the hay. He sips his coffee. "I got it pretty good right here."

He was avoiding the question. He'd done that last night, when Gale had asked his name.

What was he supposed to say, now? *Go?* He'd known Bucky for all of a day and a half, but he couldn't find it in himself to tell him to leave. Theoretically, he didn't have to go. There was enough room for the both of them. But was Bucky meant to live in his stables forever? Hide every time anyone came by? That wasn't a life. Gale's so conflicted, wants Bucky to both stay *and* go for entirely selfish reasons.

Quickly, he comes to the conclusion that when Bucky's leg is better, he'll be gone. That seems fair. He won't have to feel guilty about putting out an injured man, and in a few days his life would be back to its easy normality.

And, if he gets a few more days to enjoy whatever it was that this was making him feel, then that was only an added bonus.

"Look, you can stay a little longer, till that leg of yours feels better, but I, I got things to do," he settles on.

"Can I come?"

Buck stares at the man on the floor, incredulous. "No."

He pouts, looks disappointed for all of twenty seconds before he perks up, and says eagerly, "I could look after your horses."

“Do you know anything *about* horses?” Gale asks, doubtful.

“I know they got four legs.”

Buck stares, deadpan, Bucky grins at him with all his teeth.

“Look, just…” Buck sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose. “Stay here, and rest.”

There’s a twinkle in Bucky’s eye that Gale doesn’t know the meaning of. He shifts in the hay, sips his coffee, and says, “yessuh.”

-

Krank’s saloon was a shithole, but it was the only one they had, and that made it the best. The floor was so sticky with alcohol, you could feel your boot try and stay behind each time you took a step. The glasses they served with were chipped, stained, and never cleaned. Wooden stools gave you splinters if you didn’t know exactly where to hold. A rifle hung above the bar. It had been shot only once, when a bet involving a game of cards and a cowhands, Hambone’s, bulls had been taken too far. A man by the name of James Douglass was missing the fingers to prove it.

But the alcohol was strong, and cheaper than buying a bottle from Nash at the general store.

Gale runs errands for a while, stops by Nash to get a quick something to eat, and mid-afternoon heads for the saloon.

Curt’s already waiting for him when he arrives. There’s two drinks on the table, and Buck nods at Krank in thanks, receives one in return.

“Y’hear what Cros has been saying?” Curt asks before Gale can sit down. He doesn’t wait for an answer before continuing. “Says there’s an outlaw runnin’ round. His brother’s scared shitless.”

Curt chuckles into his glass before slugging his whiskey back.

Buck huffs a laugh of his own, and indulges in his drink to avoid saying anything.

“Think we’d know, by now. Someone’d have screamed.” Curt carries the conversation.

“Not if they were a good outlaw,” Buck counters.

Curt swallows more of his whiskey. “There are no good outlaws.”

And then the door swings open.

Looking around pleasantly, favouring his left leg, and wearing one of Gale’s jackets, is Bucky.

He looks clean, no blood on his face, hair damp and shiny. When he spots his target, his face ignites in a grin, and he wastes no time in making his way over. His limp is less obvious, and Buck knows it must be paining him to try and walk normally.

Can’t leave you alone for five seconds, Gale thinks, astonished.

“There you are!” Bucky says, loud as life. “Been looking all over for you.”

Gale takes what he hopes is a subtle deep breath. “Well, y’found me.”

“Yessuh I did,” he replies, smug.

Curt looks from Bucky to Gale.

“You know this fella?” He asks, cautious, and Buck knows he’d be ready to punch Bucky’s lights out if Gale said no.

“Yeah, he’s been visiting,” he says, and Bucky takes that as his cue to pull up a chair. He sits as slowly as he can without looking hurt.

Curt swallows the lie like honey. His disposition brightens.

“Any friend of Buck’s is a friend a’right.” He raps his hands on the table and stands, approaching Krank who’s stood wiping down the bar with a rag that’s just as filthy.

As soon as Curt is out of earshot Gale leans in close. “You follow me?”

Bucky smiles, feigning innocence, and shrugs.

“The hell is wrong with you?” Gale whispers fiercely.

“There’s only so much horse smell a man can take,” Bucky whispers back. Then he says, “I cleaned the blood off Boeing.”

Gale softens, off guard. “You did?”

Bucky shrugs again, opens his mouth to say more, but then Curt is

back at the table with three more glasses of whiskey in his hands.

They drink, talk politely about the weather, and the heat, and steer every question Curt asks away from them. They end up on the topic of boxing, and their corner of the room suddenly gets a whole lot louder.

Just as Buck is thinking of a way to excuse them, a Deputy walks through the saloon doors.

The atmosphere shifts. Only slightly, people liked Rosie, but he was still the law's right hand.

Rosie does a quick scan of the room at the doors, and when he spots Bucky, his focus clicks like the hammer of a gun.

The Deputy approaches, and Curt, oblivious to the world, raises his glass to the man.

"Howdy, Rosie," he says.

Rosie nods to him, respectful, but when he speaks, it's directly to Buck. "Whose this?"

Gale lifts his drink halfway to his mouth. "Ask him, why don't'cha."

Rosie fixes Bucky with a calculating look, runs his eyes across his body. Bucky looks relaxed as anything, tipping his chair onto it's back legs, the foot of his injured leg rested on his left.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he copies Curt's lead.

A flicker of something crosses Rosie's face. He says, somewhat bitterly, "I'm just a Deputy."

"Are you?" Bucky asks, seeming genuinely surprised. "I ain't been here all that long, but, I'd have bet just about anything that you was the Sheriff."

He's *disgustingly* charming, and Buck watches the show with a barely suppressed smile, impressed beyond measure.

Rosie almost falters, *almost* lets a pleased look replace the suspicion on his face. The Deputy has always loved being mistaken for the Sheriff. Gale *knows* he does, knows how much it means to him that people trust him. The respect he likes well enough, but the *trust*, knowing the townsfolk think he's a steady, driving force that they can count on, he's quite proud of that. And he should be, Gale thinks, he's earnt it.

“And you are?” Rosie prompts, the constant detective.

Bucky claps Gale on the back. “Friend of Buck’s. We go way back.”

He grins at Buck, light in his eyes like wildfire.

Rosie’s eyes shift to Gale. “Don’t think he’s ever mentioned you.”

The suspicion in his voice has guilt rising up once more, low in his gut. Rosie was his friend. He owed more loyalty to him than he did to Bucky, but he already felt so deep in this lie that all he could think to do was see it through. He reminds himself that in a few days, Bucky would be but a memory.

Bucky turns to Buck, slow and hurt.

“*Gale*,” he says, scandalous, “I am shocked and appalled. How come you’ve never mentioned me?”

Buck knows what the wildfire that lives inside Bucky is, now. It’s chaos. It’s mischief and havoc. It’s an easy grin with lightning at it’s edges. Right in this moment, the heat makes him nervous, but *Goddamn* if it doesn’t feel good to be warm.

Gale sips his drink, shrugs, swallows. “Not much to say.”

“*Not much to s*– after all these years?” Bucky is a tremendous actor. He’d look genuinely upset, if Buck didn’t know he was lying. *You could go on the road with it*, a voice in his head recalls.

“Well, you ain’t all that remarkable,” Gale continues, finding it easy to slip into the back and forth.

“I was pretty damn – sorry – *darn* remarkable when we met.”

The corner of Buck’s mouth curls up. “I suppose it’s been so long I can’t remember.”

Bucky grins, knowing. The tip of his tongue pokes between his teeth. His eyes are so blue, exactly what Gale imagines the ocean is like, and he finds it hard to look away.

A voice interrupts. “You stayin’ long, Mr…?”

Caught in the pretend, Gale had almost forgot they weren’t alone. He looks back to the Deputy standing over them. Rosie has his hands on his hips, pointer finger of his right hand tapping on his bones. He’s

waiting expectantly.

Curt looks highly amused, grinning behind his drink.

Bucky blinks, and he too turns back to look at Rosie. He holds out a hand. “Egan. My friend’s call me Bucky.”

Bucky Egan. Gale rolls the name around in his mind.

The Deputy frowns slightly, looks from Buck to Bucky and back again. He takes Bucky’s hand and shakes it, just once. “You got a first name, Mr Egan?”

If Buck wasn’t watching so closely, he’d have missed the way Bucky’s jaw jumps at the question. He’s still wearing that easy smile, but there’s a subtle edge to it now.

“John.”

Rosie nods. “I’m Deputy Rosenthal.”

“Very nice to meet you, Sheriff – *Deputy* – Deputy Rosenthal. I’ll get it, I promise.”

Rosie must have developed a toothache from Bucky’s sweetness, for all he does is hum. He lands his gaze on Buck, unreadable, before nodding to Curt, turning on his heels, and exiting the saloon.

There’s silence in his wake, Gale and Bucky share a glance, and then Curt is throwing his head back and cackling.

“Oh I *like* you,” he says, voice high, “yessuh, I most *certainly* do.”

John Egan lights up like the sun.

-

They stay until the sun goes down, to avoid suspicion, and because Curt and Bucky get on like a house on fire. They buy each other drink after drink (or, Gale buys Curt drinks, because Bucky doesn’t have a dollar on his person) and Buck lets them entertain each other as he thinks.

He wasn’t too fond of the way that Rosie had reacted to Bucky’s presence, like he was doing something wrong merely by existing. They might have been lying to the Deputy, but Buck still had no reason to believe that Bucky was dangerous, and neither did Rosie. Gale tells

himself that it's just Rosie being Deputy Rosenthal. He'd be suspicious of a tumbleweed if it showed up in his town unannounced. At least Bucky didn't have to spend all his time hiding in the stables anymore.

Gale waits until the men are nearing the end of their drinks, and then makes an excuse about tending to the horses. Even if he wasn't as drunk as he was, he thinks Curt would have bought it.

The two new friends shake hands, and promise to get a drink again soon. Gale places a hand on Bucky's shoulder and physically steers him out of the bar.

He seems happy – *John* seems happy, Buck thinks as they walk. His limp is not nearly as obvious as it was, but Buck puts that down to the whiskey. He nods at every man they pass, smiles charmingly at the women, who blush and duck their heads.

"Would you quit it?" Gale whispers to him after the sixth group of women Bucky sends giggling.

"Quit what?" Bucky asks, giving Buck the same smile.

It makes Gale's heart skip, the full weight of Bucky's attention smiling at him like that.

"You're unbearable," he liars, trying to calm the thundering in his chest.

"Nah, Buck, I'm remarkable."

They walk on.

"How'd you get clean?" Gale asks.

"Heated water on your stove and used your basin."

"You…" Buck stops cold. "You broke into my home."

Bucky stops a few steps ahead of him, and turns back. "The door was open."

"No it ain't. The door was *locked*."

"Okay, *yeah*, I broke in."

"You get my jacket while you were at it?"

“Looks good on me, don’t it?”

“Bucky…” Gale sighs, and he doesn’t miss the way Bucky smiles.

“Why haven’t you called me John?” He asks.

It takes Buck entirely off guard.

“You don’t call me Gale,” he counters, slowly.

“I did, at, at whats-his-names.”

“Kranks.”

“Yeah. I did at Kranks.”

Buck shrugs and shakes his head. “That wasn’t real. What’s it matter, anyhow?”

“Maybe I wanna hear you say it,” Bucky twinkles.

Gale blinks, stutters. The sky is a blood-orange inferno, and Bucky looks more like a silhouette than a person, outlined against the gold like this. He tips his head, ever so slightly, as if he was waiting for something. Gale had quickly learnt that it was hard to say no to Bucky. You wanted him to like you, wanted him to be impressed by you, wanted to do whatever you had to hold onto the attention he had to give.

He swallows thick and says as steadily as he can, “don’t break into my home again, John Egan.”

John smiles, slow, full of teeth, and says nothing the rest of the walk back to the ranch.

-

When they make it back, instead of heading for the stables, Bucky follows Gale right up to his front door.

“The hell are you doing?” Buck says when he realises, half-way through the door.

“Someone comes knocking, it’ll seem awful strange to have your guest sleeping in the stables,” Bucky explains, like it’s obvious.

It *was* true. If Rosie turned up to ask more questions, it’d be hard to

explain why he had to go to the stables to ask them. But he felt like having Bucky inside would make it that much more difficult when he left. He once again had to remind himself that Bucky was a stranger, not the old friend he'd morphed into over the afternoon.

"I, uh, only got the one bed, so…" He tries.

"That's a'right," Bucky shrugs, and Gale relaxes, before Bucky continues, "we can share."

He's in such a state of shock that Bucky slips right past him and into the house.

"Now, hold on a minute," he protests, but when he turns and sees Bucky inside his home, it dies on his tongue.

The man looks so perfectly in place that Buck's thrown entirely off balance. Maybe it's because his entire outfit belongs to Gale.

"And who is that?" He hears Bucky ask. When he steps further inside, he finds Bucky at the shelf hung above the fire, staring at the framed picture of Marge.

Gale's throat feels odd, an entire cocktail of emotions mixes in his chest, and he swallows. "Marge."

"*Marge*," Bucky repeats, "you expecting her back soon?"

It's an innocent question, and the answer is absolutely not funny, but the ridiculousness of the situation and the constant conflict in his mind has Gale scoffing out a laugh.

"No," he says, and then he takes a breath. "No, she, uh, died. While ago."

Bucky stands up fully, fixes Gale with his full attention.

"I'm sorry," he says, and Buck is taken back by the sincerity of it.

He's oddly touched, and he shakes his head, waves a hand. "It's, fine. Like I said, it was a long time ago."

Bucky's looking at him sadly, with something else in it too, and Gale can hardly stand it.

"You married?" He asks. "Was it some sweetheart of yours that shot you?"

He's grateful when Bucky grins and leans into the joke, clearly sensing the change in conversation.

"No suh. No such thing."

"You gon tell me why someone *did* shoot you?"

John limps towards the bed, carefully lays down, and laces his fingers together behind his head, boots and all.

"Maybe," he teases, and says nothing more.

-

Sleep does not come easy to Gale.

At some point they had rid themselves of their boots and jackets, leaving them only in their pants and shirtsleeves. Bucky's shirt was dotted slightly with blood and Buck gave him one of his own to wear. It's not like it mattered, the man was already wearing the rest of his clothes.

Gale had been ready to sleep on either end of the bed, but John had refused to sleep so close to his feet, and so Buck had rolled his eyes and laid down beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

It was the shoulder to shoulder that was bothering him, now. The entire length of Bucky's arm was pressed against his. It made him overly aware of every time the man shifted. His skin was warm through his shirt, as warm as his inner thigh had been when Gale's hand had brushed along the flesh there.

He screws his eyes shut, tries desperately to think of anything else, but with the man so close it makes it near impossible.

Whiskey dripping down a neck, mixing with sweat, and blood.

Something coils, hot and needy in the pit of his stomach.

Shame and guilt spring up to meet it immediately.

Not more than an hour ago they'd been discussing Marge, and now here he was, in her bed, pent up over a single touch from a man. He hasn't shared a bed with anyone since her, even when Rosie stayed the night during those years, he'd slept on the floor or in a chair.

That must be it, he decides, he'd just been alone for so long that the

contact was going straight to his head. It had nothing whatsoever to do with John Egan.

That was the easier explanation, anyway.

Bucky sniffs, rolls his shoulder, and the back of his hand brushes Gale's, feather-light.

A series of thoughts roll through Buck's mind and he curls his nails into the palm of his hand. He needs a distraction, runs through the days events in his mind from start to finish, and snags on something.

"Why'd you say *darn*, earlier?" Gale whispers aloud, remembering the way Bucky had corrected himself. If he was asleep, then Gale would have to simply lay there and suffer, but if he was still awake then maybe a conversation could take his mind off their position.

For a minute, no answer comes, and Buck thinks the other man must be asleep. Then:

"Didn't know if any of you were the religious type." He whispers it, like a secret, even though the two of them are the only ones in the room to hear it.

"Oh." That made sense. "Well, I'm not."

"Nah, I didn't think you were." He can hear Bucky's smile.

Gale frowns. "What does that mean?"

The bed shifts as Bucky shrugs. Skin drags against skin. "No religious fella lets another fella wear his pants."

That makes him laugh, and then they're both at it, the bed creaking under their combined amusement. It's still ringing in his mind when Bucky's breathing evens out in his sleep.

Gale mouths the words *John Egan* into the dark, and it feels as close to religion as he thinks he'll ever get.

Chapter End Notes

if u enjoyed leave a comment or come yell at me on tumblr @signifier

Luger

Chapter Summary

> Buck had been dreaming, recently, of a dark shadow in an orange twilight. He never saw their face, but he could feel the grin that stretched across their mouth. It called him things – sweetheart, darling, partner. When it spoke, the voice was familiar.

Chapter Notes

> a massive shoutout to @swifty-fox on tumblr who DREW stablehand gale and outlaw bucky. i woke up to it this morning and am just so incredibly honoured that anyone would even think about doing that, let alone creating something as beautiful as they have. it's genuinely a work of art so please go and give them as much love as u've all been kind enough to give me.
>
> https://www.tumblr.com/sig-nifier/745448503496589312/oh-my-god-this-is-gorgeous-im-obsessed?source=share
>
> this was originally so self-indulgent, but to everyone who comments or takes the time to create a whole damn art piece: u really do make it worth writing.
>
> anyway enough with the sappyness.
>
> plot? what plot?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You ain’t doing it right!”

“It ain’t me, it’s the *horse*!”

“Nah, you ain’t doing it right.”

Bucky stands, leaning his forearms on the training pen fence. The foot of his bad leg rests gently on the wooden, bottom rung.

Gale pulls the horse back around to the starting line. When they’re both ready, he clicks his teeth, squeezes his legs, and sets the horse off on a trot. Luger, the midnight black Friesian, approaches the plank that they’ve propped up on two barrels, and just when he should jump, he stops suddenly and almost throws Buck forwards.

Bucky laughs, and says for the third, frustrating time, “you ain’t doing it right.”

“Do you wanna try?” Gale challenges, twisting his head to look at Bucky as Luger retreats to the start.

He should have known what the answer would be. John Egan had been living in his home for six days now, and had yet to turn down a bet or sit still. He’d accompanied Buck on every errand. When Fortress needed a shoe replacing, Gale had to get a new pincer from the blacksmith, as his was old and long past rusted. Bucky had trailed along eagerly, and when he’d met the blacksmiths dog, Meatball, it had been hard to tell who was more excited about meeting who. They’d met with Curt a few times since their first meeting, and in a few hours they’d be out once more for a boxing match they’d set up.

Which meant that Curt and Bucky were going to get drunk and see who would win in a fight between them. Against his will, Gale had been ruled the ‘judge’ of this match. It was unsurprising that they’d been drunk when these plans were made.

Bucky raps his hands on the fence and makes his way round to the gate.

Gale slips off the horse, keeps a hold on the reigns. He’s sweating, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, and he enjoys the moment to catch his breath.

When John gets close, he puts his hands on Luger’s saddle, his bad leg in the stirrup, and pushes off the ground. He get’s a little ways up before he’s groaning and landing back on the dirt.

“Goddamn,” he says with a pained laugh.

Bucky was so good at seeming okay that it was hard to remember it had only been a week since Gale had stitched up the wound in his thigh. It was healing nicely, they’d been taking good care of it, but it still hurt him to put all his weight on it.

The man looks to Gale, gives him his best smile. “A hand, partner?”

Partner. Buck had been dreaming, recently, of a dark shadow in an orange twilight. He never saw their face, but he could feel the grin that stretched across their mouth. It called him things – sweetheart, darling, partner. When it spoke, the voice was familiar.

It had been a *week*, and Gale was starting to wish Bucky's leg never healed. He couldn't remember the last time he had warmed to someone so quickly, had enjoyed someone's company so much.

Of course, there had been Marge, but that had been sweet, easy. This was different. At times, Bucky infuriated him, but the fire Bucky ignited was a welcome heat, and he felt drunk off it's fumes in his presence. That wasn't to say he was in *love* with Bucky. They had just became fast friends quick, and Gale was simply enjoying having him so close. His life hadn't been this exciting in a long time.

In the present, Bucky's still looking at him expectantly. Gale rolls his eyes and sighs before dropping the reigns and moving to stand behind him. Slowly, he places gentle hands on Bucky's hips.

Bucky doesn't move, and without seeing his face it's hard to tell what he's thinking.

Gale's hands are warm in an instant, lightning sparks up his arms, and he's sure it's just the summer heat that makes his face flush.

"A'right, come on," he says, and maybe it's the proximity that makes him so bold, for he gives Bucky's hip an encouraging pat.

That seems to kickstart him, and quickly he's reaching up for the saddle once more. He pushes off, Gale lifts, and with their combined effort Bucky manages to swing his other leg over the horse.

Buck retreats to the fence, wipes the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, and leans back with both elbows propped up on the wood.

Bucky takes hold of the reigns in one hand, leans forward, and uses the other to stroke down Luger's neck. He whispers something, Gale can't tell what, and then he's sitting up and setting off at a fast trot.

Luger moves straight ahead, determined, and promptly stops short just before the plank.

"You ain't doing it right!" Buck mocks from the sidelines.

Bucky soothes the horse with one hand and makes a very rude gesture with the other.

-

Hours later they're out back of Krank's saloon. The bartender had overheard their plans whilst pouring the whiskey, and had told them to take it out there if they didn't want a certain Deputy throwing them in lock-up, or a certain murderous Sheriff doing something worse.

They'd had round about five or six glasses of whiskey each, except Gale, who was stone cold sober.

Bucky slips off Gale's jacket and hands it to him, rolling his shoulders. Gale takes it with a roll of his eyes and leans back against the saloon wall.

"Mind his leg," Buck warns Curt seriously, whose practicing jabs into the evening air. They'd told him he'd hurt it from falling off a horse, and once again, Curt believed them.

Curt makes a face and dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

"I ain't gon hurt him none."

"And *you*," he fixes Bucky with a weighty look. John looks at him and grins. "Y'all stop when I say stop."

The two men face each other, fists up to protect their faces. Curt blows Bucky a kiss, and the latter winks. They look to Gale.

Buck sighs. "Go on, then."

Get it out of your systems, he thinks.

Curt strikes fast and lands a blinding blow to Bucky's temple.

John's head snaps to the side and with him distracted Curt lands another in the same spot. Bucky grunts, and when Curt tries for a third time he dodges out of the way, grabs his arm as it swings past his face, pulls him forward, off balance, and smacks him in the jaw.

Curt stumbles, barely stops himself from landing on all fours.

Bucky glances at Gale and grins, already breathing heavy. There's blood running down his right eyebrow and crimson in his teeth. Not looking, he doesn't see Curt coming.

The shorter man gets him right in the nose and knocks him backwards into the mud. Curt lifts his foot, intent on driving his boot into Bucky's face, but John rolls out of the way quick-like, cackling. He gets back to his feet and puts up his hands.

They're facing each other once more, circling, grinning with all their teeth like wild animals.

They feint a few times, amused. Gale lets his head fall back against the wall.

It's interesting, seeing Bucky like this. The man is clearly capable, quick, strong. He's not as messy as Curt is, a practice to his movements, but he puts his full weight behind every punch, and it makes Gale think he's not as controlled as he seems.

Grinning with blood dripping down his chin, Buck has the overwhelming urge to take him apart like a cheap watch.

"Come on, Curt," Bucky goads, rolling his shoulders. The fact he's leaning more on his left leg doesn't go unnoticed by Gale. He stops shifting on the spot and spreads his arms wide. "What you waitin' for?"

Curt's too easily baited, and it makes his attack obvious. He rushes forward, low, and just as he gets his arms around Bucky's waist to tackle, Bucky grabs hold of his jacket and twists, using Curt's momentum to take them both to the ground with Bucky on top.

They hit the dirt hard, and then it's just a scramble of limbs and laughter as they both try to get the upper hand. Curt's not doing too hot in that department, but he must brush the wound on Bucky's thigh, as the other man gasps in pain.

"A'right," Buck immediately inserts himself, pulling Bucky up and away by the shoulder, "enough. Bucky wins."

Bucky stops fighting and lets himself be dragged backwards. His chest heaves, and he takes hold of Buck's wrist and hoists their hands into the air, announcing himself as champion.

Gale rolls his eyes, fond.

From the floor, Curt splutters and protests.

"He got you pinned, Curt."

The man gets to his feet. "He cheated."

"How?" Bucky and Buck ask in unison.

Curt looks between the two of them, amused. "I don't know yet, but I

am gon figure it out."

All three of them laugh and Bucky throws an arm around Curt's shoulders.

"Let me buy you a drink with my winnings," he says.

Curt doesn't argue with that.

-

Bucky sings the entire walk back to the ranch.

Oh, the wayward wind is a restless wind,

A restless wind that yearns to wander,

And he was born the next of kin,

The next of kin to the wayward wind.

Gale trails behind him, hands in his pockets, his – *Bucky's* – jacket thrown over his shoulder, content. Bucky's ahead of him, singing loud, dancing.

Oh, I met him there in a border town,

He vowed we'd never part,

Tho' he tried his best to settle down,

Now I'm alone with a broken heart.

The following verse dissolves into mumbles and hums, Buck's not entirely convinced he knows the rest of the song. Bucky spins, walks backwards to stare at Gale as he goes.

-

"Sit," Buck commands, pointing to one of the two chairs stationed at the small table in his kitchen.

Bucky does as he's told.

Gale fetches the same basin, fills it with cold water, fetches the same cloth he'd used on Bucky before. He places all of it on the kitchen table before lighting some candles to see better. Then, he takes up the

rag and dips it into the water.

When Gale approaches with the cloth, Bucky spreads his legs for him to get closer.

Buck's throat feels tight and he steps into the space. Carefully, he tips Bucky's face up with his pointer finger, then uses his thumb to tilt him gently to the side. Bucky's eyes flutter closed and he sighs a small sound. Not one of pain, but of contentment.

With the blood staining his skin, he looks obscene.

Gale's glad the other man's eyes are shut, so he can't see the heat rushing to Buck's face.

He presses the damp cloth to the cut in his eyebrow and Bucky flinches, hums. A slow, careful drag down his cheek, wiping off the blood that had trickled downwards. When the cloth catches on his split lip, Bucky's eyes flutter open. He looks up at Gale, soft, blinks slow, cat-like.

Buck pulls the cloth away, dips it back into the water, lifts up, rings it out with one hand. He doesn't remove the hold he has on John's face. Bucky's tongue pokes out and runs over the cut in his bottom lip.

A tiny river of blood was escaping from the slash in his eyebrow again, and when he wipes it away a droplet of water starts down Bucky's cheekbone. Gale wipes it away with a stroke of his thumb.

The way Bucky's looking at him should be framed. *No man should ever be allowed to look like this*, Gale thinks.

There's a moment then where they stare at each other, Bucky caught in Gale's grip. He could pull away easily, but he doesn't. The hand holding the cloth hovers between them, forgotten, and water drips onto the floor. Gale briefly considers standing here, holding him here, for the rest of their lives. He thinks he'd like to drown in this ocean gaze.

Buck blinks, clears his throat, and steps away.

"You won't need stitches." He turns his back as he moves to place the bowl of water on the kitchen countertop.

"Small miracles," Bucky says behind him, voice rough.

When he risks the turn back to look at him, Bucky smiles, takes a breath, and says, loud: “You ever shoot a gun?”

The moment has passed, and they are just Buck and Bucky.

Gale frowns, amused. “What?”

“You got steady hands,” Bucky remarks.

The statement goes straight to his brain. “Few times. I *do* have a rifle.”

Bucky shuts his eyes and chuckles softly. “Right. I remember.”

When he opens his eyes again, the ocean is reflected citrus in the orange of the candles they have burning. “You ever shoot a pistol?”

“No, but I figure it’s pretty much the same.”

John tips his head back. “No, Buck, *no*. Rifle’s are borin’, they’re easy.” He looks back towards him, candle-light bright. “Pistols are wild.”

Buck huffs a laugh. “Well, I’ll do that some time.”

“Let’s go, now.”

“*Right* now?” Gale asks. He throws a glance out the window. “It’s dark, and you’re drunk.”

“Not that drunk. I can still aim,” Bucky protests.

Buck scoffs. “You’re gon have another bullet hole if we go out there.”

“You that bad of a shot, Buck?”

“I – *no*, I just don’t want to waste more thread on you.”

Bucky claps a hand to his chest and tips the chair back, wounded. When the front legs land again, John springs out of the chair, energised.

“Come on come on come *on*,” he begs, and Gale is gone.

They retrieve the Colt from it’s hiding space in Gale’s floorboard and a can of mustard that Bucky finds at the back of his pantry.

“Really?” He’d said, disgusted.

Outside, in the refreshing night air, they balance the can on the fence of the training pen and take ten paces away. Moonlight hits the metal and it shines like the stars that litter the vast black of the sky.

Bucky puts the Colt heavily in the palm of Gale's hand and backs away.

It's lighter than a rifle – that's the first stupid, obvious conclusion he comes to. The second is that it's still warm from Bucky's hand.

He's familiar with the heavy wood of a rifle pressing into his shoulder. He take's a second to get used to the weight of the Colt before pulling the hammer back and taking aim. Buck closes his left eye, breathes, fires.

The bullet lands far off in the dirt, a dust cloud the only evidence it had hit.

Bucky gives him one single second of silence before he bursts into laughter.

"Yeah, a'right, jackass," Gale fumes, "you hit it, then."

They swap positions. Their fingertips brush as Gale hands over the gun.

John pulls back the hammer and hardly takes the time to aim as he lifts his arm and pulls the trigger. There's a soft *ping* as the bullet finds its home in the can.

The smug smile he gives Buck opens the cut in his lip.

"How the *hell* did you do that?" Gale exclaims, impressed.

Bucky laughs and holds out the gun. "Come here, I'll show you."

Gale walks back to what he assumes is now the shooting mark and takes the pistol. Bucky steps out of his way, and then steps up behind him.

Buck stills instantly. He can feel the entire length of Bucky's body pressed against his back.

A hand lands on his shoulder, pushes him to stand slightly side on, and then runs slowly down his arm. When it reaches his elbow, it curls into the space between Gale's arm and his ribs and lifts, pointing the gun out in front of him. The guiding hand takes it's time then,

finally coming to a stop when it reaches Buck's hold on the Colt.

Bucky's large hand holds both Gale's and the gun, keeping them still.

"You need a steady hand," he murmurs softly.

Gale's knees feel useless. He leans back into Bucky to keep his balance.

Every inch of him feels like it's burning in the blaze that is John Egan. He smells like gunpowder, like a blown out match. When Bucky breathes, Gale breathes. He can feel the quick beating of his heart in his back.

Bucky bends down slightly, matching his eyeline with Buck's. The brunette exhales slowly to balance their aim and when the breath hits the back of Gale's neck, his right ear, he feels lightning ignite across his skin.

"A'right," Bucky says, low, quiet, "now, shoot."

The trigger's pulled, the Colt jolts their hands, and the bullet finds it's mark.

Chapter End Notes

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Gogi Grant

Chapter Summary

> The Cheyenne river was pretty – fields that rolled as far as the eye could see. In the spring, daisy's covered the grass like freshly fallen snow. He can see Bucky there now, a flower caught in his dark hair.

Chapter Notes

> ANOTHER incredible piece of art from @swifty-fox over on tumblr, who drew chapter 4's ending scene.
>
> https://www.tumblr.com/sig-nifier/745540790008299520/its-like-u-took-them-straight-from-my-mind-dont?source=share
>
> grab ur horses! ride on over to their blog! trample all over the like button!
>
> a tiny time-skip in this one - 4/5ish days :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You got mail," is the first thing Bucky says when Gale wakes.

He's already out of bed, sipping coffee in one of the kitchen chairs. He's got his left foot balanced on his right knee. It had been a week and a half now since he had shown up in the stables, and his leg was almost ready to remove the stitches. There was a nice yellow bruise surrounding the cut, but that was as bad as it looked.

Gale sits up, runs both hands through his hair. He clears his throat and squints over at the kitchen table. He can just make out an open letter on the wood.

"You read it?" Gale asks, unsurprised.

Bucky shrugs. "It had my name on it."

When Gale eventually gets out of bed and crosses the floor to the table, he finds a ripped open envelope addressed *to Buck*.

"Uh huh," he says, dully.

Bucky smiles and lifts the cup to his mouth. Before he can drink, Gale takes the mug from him and sits in the chair opposite, taking up the letter whilst he sips. It was lukewarm, but worth the look on John's face.

Bucky sighs and gets up to fill another mug.

Gale pulls the note out from the envelope and recognises the handwriting immediately.

Buck,

If it suits you, come this evening and see the gramophone I mentioned a little while ago.

Got something we need to talk about.

Your friend,

Rosie.

Something we need to talk about. Gale had three guesses as to what that was, and all three of them were currently stood making coffee in his kitchen.

He sighs, throwing the letter onto the table.

"Sounds serious," Bucky mentions from behind him.

"It'll be fine."

"We need a story."

"We got one," Buck says over his shoulder, "you're visitin'."

Bucky snorts and comes to sit back down. "You think your Deputy's gonna stop there?"

Unfortunately, Bucky made a good point. Gale groans and rubs his eyes. He sighs, rests his head in his hand and looks across the table at John.

"The hell are we gonna tell him?"

"How'd we meet?" Bucky ponders.

Buck smirks. "I saved your life."

Bucky rolls his eyes and kicks him under the table.

“I rode through your town,” Gale thinks suddenly, “you liked the look of my horse and inquired. We started writin’ after that.”

The other man considers it, tipping his head. “What did I inquire about?”

Gale shrugs. “Breed, or…I don’t know, the brush I used on it’s mane – look, don’t overcomplicate things. Simple details make for the best lies.”

Glee covers Bucky’s features and he grins brightly. “Yessuh. Spoken like a real outlaw.”

It’s Gale’s turn to kick Bucky, and he does.

“Where’d I visit?” He continues.

“Hm?” Bucky hums, innocent.

“Where you *from*?” Buck presses.

For a moment he thinks Bucky isn’t going to tell him. He’s disappointed by that. Then, Bucky says quietly:

“Sioux Falls.”

Gale’s mind short-circuits, caught between honour that Bucky trusted him enough to tell him, and shock at how far he’d come.

“Sioux Falls?” He repeats dumbly. “Ain’t that like, six, seven hours from Lemmon?”

“I rode fast,” Bucky grins. It doesn’t meet his eyes. Gale says nothing, holds his gaze until Bucky looks away. He shrugs, nonchalant. “I stopped part-way. Some river not far from here.”

“The Cheyenne river?”

“Maybe. Was real pretty, wherever it was. Maybe I’ll take you, sometime.”

The Cheyenne river *was* pretty – fields that rolled as far as the eye could see. In the spring, daisy’s covered the grass like freshly fallen snow. He can see Bucky there now, a flower caught in his dark hair.

Bucky's wish to distract him isn't lost on him.

"Rode?" Gale frowns, realisation hitting him. "Sheriff said Crosby said you was on foot."

He shakes his head. "The horse was too loud. I let it go when I got to the edge of town and walked."

"*Shot*?"

Bucky just shrugs. "I'd packed the wound while I rode. Lost it at some point."

"Holy hell, Bucky." He was astounded, that Bucky had the mental and physical strength to do that, that he hadn't bled out before Gale found him. "What were you runnin' from?"

Bucky sighs, Gale can physically see him close himself off as he leans back in his chair.

"Does it matter?" He asks, bored.

"No," Buck says, and he thinks he means it, "but after everythin' I've done for you I think I got a right to know if someone's gon chase you."

"No one's chasin' me."

"Tell me anyway," Gale says quickly.

Bucky looks away, can't hold Buck's gaze, and his jaw ticks.

Gale leans across the table and wraps cold fingers around Bucky's wrist.

Something had changed between them, since that night they had gone shooting. Some unspoken sense of knowing.

That night, Bucky had rolled over in his sleep and snaked his arm around Gale's waist, dropped his forehead onto Gale's shoulder. He had laid so still it hurt, felt the weight of his arm every time he breathed. They didn't talk about it in the morning, didn't talk about the way they had woken with Gale's head resting on Bucky's, or the fact that Bucky's hand had found its way inside Buck's shirt. Bucky had simply pulled his hand free with a sheepish smile, lightly patted Gale's stomach, and that had been that.

If they slept a little closer after that, why did it need to be spoken

about? It didn't *mean* anything, Gale kept repeating like a mantra, all of the little touches and glances that passed between them. What was the difference between clapping Curt on the shoulder as a goodbye, and Bucky's foot pressed to his when they sat across from each other? It didn't mean anything.

If he said it enough times, he figured eventually it would be true.

He waits until Bucky's eyes slide back to his, and when they do there's a pleading look behind them.

"Please?" Gale asks.

He only asks.

Bucky deflates.

"I had this friend, and he…died. The lawmen back in Sioux Falls are… well – let's just say they don't have two sticks to rub together between them."

While he talks, Gale unconsciously slides his hand from Bucky's wrist to his palm.

"They picked the first man they laid eyes on," Bucky continues bitterly, "and that was me. They was weavin' the Goddamn noose when I left."

Gale frowns sadly. It was a story he was all too familiar with.

"That's unfortunate," he says softly.

Bucky nods, gaze focused on their joined hands.

"One of the lawmen shoot you?"

"Nah," John shakes his head, "that was a stable boy when he caught me stealin' his horse. You know how news spreads in small towns."

"Like wildfire," Buck mumbles.

They just sit for a while, holding hands. At some point, Gale had started to gently run his thumb back and forth across Bucky's skin.

"We should tell Rosie," he suggests.

As soon as he says it he knows it's a mistake. Bucky pulls his hand

away and stands. “No.”

“He’s got some Governor friend, he could help,” Gale tries.

“*No*.”

“Bucky, he’s not like other lawmen, I trust hi–“

“I *don’t* want to tell him,” Bucky says fiercely, making a slashing motion with his hand. The final word.

Gale sighs, annoyed. Bucky had done nothing wrong and Rosie could potentially clear his name. Why wouldn’t you take an opportunity like that? Why keep hiding when you could *live*?

He thought about what Bucky had said about his lawmen, about feeling the noose already around his neck. Gale got that, but whilst Gale had seen what a bastard Sheriff would do to a person, he’d been lucky enough to never be on the receiving end. Bucky couldn’t say the same, and so Gale might not like it, but he had to understand his distrust.

“You hadn’t got a letter in a while, came to check I was a’right.” Gale completes their story, tired.

Bucky nods, once, and promptly walks out the front door.

Gale tips his head back, shuts his eyes, and tries very hard to sink through the floor.

-

The rest of the morning passes slowly. Bucky doesn’t come back inside for lunch, and when Gale goes out to tend to the horses, he doesn’t see him in the training pen, or the stables.

He tries not to think about it, tells himself *he’ll come back*, but there is an unshakeable fear that he won’t. With every hour that passes his terror, and his irritation, grows. It makes it hard to do anything else. He wants to pull up a chair and stare at the door until Bucky walks through it. He wants to take Boeing and ride through the town until he finds him, wants to grab hold and shake and shake and shake.

What he does instead, is clean himself up and get ready to visit Rosie. He fetches a fresh shirt, scrapes as much mud from his shoes as he can.

He's lacing up his boots when he hears the door open.

Gale doesn't look up, just keeps tying his laces.

The footsteps walk right up until Gale's staring at two pairs of boots on the floor.

"…Sorry," the familiar voice of John Egan says.

Buck can't help it, he looks up from his place on the bed.

Bucky's staring down at him. There's a red tint to his cheeks, one Gale recognises.

Gale looks back to his shoes. "For what?"

"Leavin'."

He finishes with his laces, places his hands on his knees, and pushes himself to standing. Bucky's close enough that their chests brush. Gale shrugs.

"I ain't your keeper." He steps past him, heading for the door.

A hand closes on his arm, pulls him back and around until he's facing Bucky.

The man stares at him, eyes a little glassy, and seems as if he's going to say something. His lips part and his gaze travels over Gale's face, as if he were committing it to memory, and then stops, looking at something just above Buck.

Gale slowly raises his eyebrows, about to ask what he's looking at, when Bucky raises his free hand and lightly runs it through Gale's desert hair. It feels fucking glorious, but not enough. Buck wants him to scrape his nails across his skull. When Bucky pulls free, he's holding a short piece of straw between his thumb and pointer finger.

The pair stare at it, as if it were some monumental thing.

"I'm goin' to Rosie's," Gale mutters, throat dry.

Bucky hums.

"You wanna come?" He asks softly, a peace offering.

Bucky's eyes flick to him and narrow, suspicious.

“If you’re there, you can trust I haven’t said nothin’,” he shrugs, “and he’s got a gramophone, I think you’ll like it.”

The look on Bucky’s face softens.

“I *do* trust you,” Bucky says, dripping in sincerity, “hell, you’re about the only one I think I ever *have*. If I was gonna bet on anythin’, I’d bet on you, Buck.”

Gale feels off balance, feels like the only thing stopping him from tipping over is the steady weight of Bucky’s hand on his arm. John’s looking at him with such feeling, if he just leant forward…

Bucky drops the piece of straw and smiles. “Let’s go.”

-

Rosie smiles warmly when he opens the door, but the smile quickly dies on his face when his eyes slip off Buck and land instead on *Bucky*.

“Howdy, *Deputy*,” Bucky says, all smiles.

The walk to Rosie’s home had been pleasant. They’d taken their time, talked about nothing, bumped shoulders every few steps. As they’d got closer, Gale had told Bucky to *be nice*, and John had winked in reply.

Rosie says nothing, but the chill radiating from him could have snowed South Dakota under in seconds. He moves aside for them to enter.

Bucky does this eagerly, makes a big show of thoughtfully wiping his boots before moving deeper into Rosie’s house.

“You couldn’t leave him at home?” Rosie mutters to Gale as he steps inside.

“Didn’t want him chewin’ up the furniture,” Buck quips, and he doesn’t miss the smirk that crosses the Deputy’s face.

The gramophone was a delight to behold. Chocolate, polished oak wood and a golden horn that shone like treasure. It rested on a small side table Rosie had in his kitchen, and a few records leant up against it on the floor.

Bucky whistles low when he sees it. “I bet that plays some pretty sounds.”

“You like music?” Rosie asks as he follows him over. Gale can hear the judgement in his voice.

“Yessuh I do.” John leans down, rests his hands on his knees to get a closer look.

“You gon show us how it works?” Buck asks, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

Rosie brightens instantly, and he smiles as he reaches down to pluck a record from the floor. He’s so eager he doesn’t even seem to mind that Bucky’s there anymore. The two of them fuss over the machine, ill from both sides forgotten. Rosie even lets Bucky wind the crank.

Gale watches, watches Bucky exist in his life, and finds he can’t remember what it had been like without him.

The record begins to play, and Gale’s just starting to think the song sounds familiar when Bucky gasps.

“This is *my* song!” He exclaims, excited. He whips his head around to look at Gale. “This is the song, Buck!”

The wayward wind is a restless wind,

A restless wind that yearns to wander.

Gale recognises it instantly as the song Bucky had sung the night after his fight with Curt.

“*You* like Gogi Grant?” Rosie says, judging once more. Gale doesn’t miss the way he looks Bucky up and down.

“Full of surprises, ain’t I?” Bucky says cheekily.

Rosie laughs. The Deputy *laughs*. He shakes his head and walks away from the gramophone, heading to the cupboards that line his kitchen wall. He opens one and takes out three glasses.

Bucky sings while Rosie pours, and this time, when it gets to the third chorus, he remembers all the words.

“Where you from, John?” Rosie asks pleasantly, handing him a drink.

It’s such a turn of disposition that Gale briefly considers the possibility that the alcohol is poisoned.

Bucky stops singing and takes the glass with a grin and a wink.

“Sioux Falls,” he offers up easily. He takes a swig of the whiskey and swallows, gesturing to Gale with the remains. “S’where I met this one.”

Buck accepts the glass that’s offered to him, sips it lightly. “Bucky likes horses.”

“Well,” Rosie says, sitting down to the table beside him, “no wonder you get along.”

“It’s a wonder *you* do,” Bucky jokes, watching the record spin. “I didn’t know Buck *had* other friends with good taste.”

“He has to have fun *some* time,” Rosie teases.

“Whose side are you on?” Buck asks, wounded.

-

Take a chance,

Take a chance,

Tell him now that you care,

Gale feels warm, content, like he could sit in this kitchen for the rest of his life and listen to Rosie and John talk. His friend, and his…well, Bucky.

It’s like he wasn’t needed. A few well timed compliments from Bucky and Rosie was as easily spun as the record they had on – another of Gogi Grant’s.

Gale lets his eyes slip shut, lets the music wash right into his skin.

Don’t refuse,

Win or lose,

You must make him aware,

“I think we’ve lost him,” he hears Rosie whisper.

“You think we can get down to Krank’s before he realises we’re gone?” Is Bucky’s reply. Gale can hear the smile in his voice. He hopes its

directed at him.

You're in love,

You're in love,

Can't you see?

You're in love,

Cries my heart, to me.

"I can hear you, jackasses," he mumbles, not even bothering to open his eyes.

Bucky snickers, and a chair scrapes. He says something about the whiskey passing through him and when Buck opens his eyes it's to watch as the door swings closed behind him.

The record winds to an end, and silence falls.

The Deputy turns his drink in his hands.

"You gonna tell me who the hell this man is?" He asks.

"What?" Buck's blood runs cold.

Rosie leans in closer, whispers, like he's worried Bucky can hear them through the walls. "What's he got on you? He threaten you?"

Gale almost breaks his neck from whiplash.

"*Threaten* me?" He repeats, confused. "No, I told you, he's visitin'."

Rosie slams a hand down on the table making Gale, and all three glasses, jump. "*Don't* lie to me. You don't have a Goddamn friend from Sioux Falls."

When he continues, it's slow, a restrained anger. "You think I'm stupid, Buck? You think I'd believe you had a friend who *shares your name*, and you never mention him all these years? He never visits – not once – I never see you write any letters, and suddenly he's here?"

Gale's heart beats harshly in his chest, both with fear that Rosie had been paying so much attention (he supposes he should have expected that) and with a fierce need to defend Bucky.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he says, trying to keep his voice calm.

“How ‘bout the truth?” Rosie shoots back.

“I am,” Buck insists.

“Nope. Try again.”

The chill in Gale’s veins ignites and he stares at Rosie, astounded.

“*Don’t* talk to me like that,” he says slowly, “I am *not* one of your suspects.”

“Then quit actin’ like one.”

The pair glare at one another, breathing heavy, the law and the liar.

“Why’s he wearin’ your jacket?” The Deputy asks.

“He likes it,” Gale spits.

Rosie leans back in his chair and sighs, shaking his head. He’s silent for a moment, and then he says, quietly, sadly, “I just don’t know why you’re lyin’ to me.”

Buck gets to his feet, his chair scraping the floor aggressively. “I am telling you the Goddamn truth but you refuse to hear it. You trust me so little? Bucky’s done nothing but *exist*, and you treat him like an outlaw! You talk to him nicely all night, but the second his back’s turned you’re lookin’ for somewhere to stick the knife. So much for your fuckin’ *honour*.”

Rosie looks at him, wounded. It’s harsh, Gale knows it is, and it’s made even harsher because he *is* lying, but he can’t stop himself. When it came to Bucky, he felt crazy, like he could destroy anyone who said a bad word against his name. It would be so easy to fix this, to tell Rosie the truth, but he was too far gone.

Bucky had asked him not to tell, and all Bucky had to do was ask.

Gale strides to the door, yanks it open, and turns back to fire one more parting shot.

“You’re as bad as the Goddamn Sheriff.”

John’s a short distance from the house, and just as Gale stormrs into the evening, Bucky’s turning and walking back, fumbling with the belt

of his pants.

“Bucky,” Gale barks, watches the figure’s head snap up, “let’s go.”

-

They walked back in silence. Bucky had been confused, and asked a few times why they were leaving so suddenly, but meeting only Gale’s icy demeanour he’d soon fallen quiet.

Gravel crunches under their boots, chickens cluck somewhere in the far distance.

Bucky clears his throat.

“You, a’right?” He asks cautiously.

“Fine.” Gale keeps up his fast pace.

“You sure about that?” There’s a nervous laughter to his voice.

“Why haven’t you left?” Gale suddenly rounds on Bucky, stopping short. “Your leg’s near fine. I got horses to steal, and there are further places from Sioux Falls than here.”

Bucky frowns, looking taken aback.

“Did…did the Deputy *say* somethin’? Cos, if he did–“ he tries.

“*Why* are you still here?” Buck pleads.

“I like you,” Bucky says simply.

Oh.

“You like me,” Gale repeats.

“You ain’t got that one figured out by now?” Bucky says shyly.

The bitter cold inside of him melts slowly, drips down his left arm and out of his fingertips, warmed by Bucky’s flame.

There was a voice at the back of his mind telling him to let himself have this, telling him that it was okay to be happy, and it was disgustingly clear to anyone who had seen them together that *Bucky* made Gale happy. He was allowed to feel what he felt, and he didn’t need to justify it to himself or defend it to anyone else. Bucky was

here, alive and *so* warm. Buck knew who the voice belonged to, and he missed her dearly.

“You like me,” Gale says again. He lets it mean something, and a small smile starts to spread on his face.

“Yessuh,” Bucky breathes, “I most surely do.”

Chapter End Notes

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Deputy Rosenthal

Chapter Summary

The Sheriff's station was a cold place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Buck knocked on Rosie's door two mornings after they had fought, an apology held tightly behind his teeth, he waited a good ten minutes before deciding the Deputy wasn't in.

It was Bucky who had convinced him to go. He could see how unhappy Buck was with being at odds with his friend. Gale could tell Bucky felt guilty, felt like the strife between them had been his fault.

"Just go," he'd said this morning, muffled into their pillow. He was lying on his stomach, face turned away, one arm tucked underneath the pillow whilst the other rested over Gale's waist. "You want to."

Gale was sat up in the bed, leaning back against the wall the head end of the mattress was up against.

"I don't want to," he'd challenged.

Bucky had sighed, long and deep, before lifting his head from the pillow and turning to face him. "You do. You like him. Go."

"I wanna stay right here. Maybe I like you more," Gale had muttered, just to watch the flush that rose up on Bucky's skin.

Bucky rolled his eyes, smiling, before lifting his arm from across Gale's body and shoving him.

Gale flailed, one of his legs slipped out of the bed and his foot hit the floor to stop him from entirely falling.

"Go," Bucky had laughed. "Tell him he ain't like the Sheriff and you're sorry you said it and that I'm just so pretty you'd wanted to keep me all to yourself, which is why you ain't never mentioned me."

He had managed to break Buck's resolve, who had laughed and gotten out of bed to get dressed.

“Why’s it matter so much to you?” He’d asked.

Bucky had turned his face away and flopped back down onto the pillow. He’d said, “I don’t like seein’ you sad.”

And so Gale had journeyed to Rosie’s house, thinking of Bucky’s words and feeling all the while like a schoolboy with a crush.

Now, he was walking away from the house, heading for the only other place he thought Rosie might be.

-

Buck walks up to the door, takes a deep breath, tries to remember the way the sun feels on his skin, pushes it open, and steps into the dark.

The Sheriff’s station was a cold place.

Dark, wooden walls where mold spreads like disease. There were no windows. The only light came through the glass in the front door, and that was scoffed by ravenous shadows. At the back of the station was a large, metal cage – there were no benches inside, forcing the occupants to stand, or sit on the piercing floor, and in one corner sat a wooden bucket. There was a large hole in it’s side. The bars of the prison looked as if they could have been installed hours ago they gleamed so brightly. It was empty – lock-up always was – because nobody dared do anything to deserve it. If they had, chances were Rosie had already sorted the issue, and was keeping it to himself.

A single, wooden desk sits like an island in the middle of the station, facing the cage, and at it sits the Sheriff.

Sometimes, Buck thought the Sheriff was a corpse. He haunted the station, always sat in his chair as if he’d died in it, and every morning he breathed his first breath to frequent the town and drag those he could to Hell, and every night he returned and passed on once more. Cursed to repeat the cycle each day. Maybe that’s what made him so cold.

He has his head bent, looking at something on his desk, and when the door clicks shut behind Gale, he looks up.

He says nothing, doesn’t even turn around. Buck’s skin crawls.

With a quick glance of the room, Gale could see that he and the Sheriff were alone. He wasn’t too surprised by that, Rosie mostly took

statements and documents home to work through to avoid being here, but the observation did leave him feeling deeply uneasy.

“You know where Deputy Rosenthal is?” He calls across the room. He didn’t dare move further in. There was a high chance he wouldn’t make it back out. *No sudden moves,* he thought, *stay nice and still.*

“He ain’t here,” the Sheriff replies.

I can see that, Gale thinks, irritation bleeding into his anxiety.

“You know where he might be?” He presses.

“He left town.”

Gale frowns. “He say where?”

“No.”

“He say when he might get back?”

“No.”

Buck rolls his eyes and bites back a sigh. The Sheriff’s head twitches. Buck’s heart jolts, and he takes a slow, quiet step back towards the door.

“You tell him I was lookin’ for him?” He asks, quickly adding, “please?”

Another step backwards. He reaches behind him and feels for the door handle. Sweaty hands find rusted metal.

“I’ll tell him,” comes the Sheriff’s cold, monotone reply.

“Much obliged,” Gale breathes, pulling the door open and stepping backwards into the sun.

-

In the middle of the night, Gale’s woken by a soft knocking on his front door.

He thinks he’s imagined it at first, but then the knock comes again, hardly there.

Gale carefully extracts himself from Bucky’s arm and climbs out of the

bed. He grabs his jacket – carelessly flung over a chair – and slips it on before opening the door.

Deputy Rosenthal stands on his doorstep. His face is red, his hair windswept, and there's a horse hitched to the training pen fence a little way behind him.

Gale frowns and steps out into the twilight, closing the door softly behind him.

"What are you doin' here? Sheriff said you left Lemmon," he says with a frown.

"I did," Rosie says, putting his hands in his pockets, "I went to Sioux Falls."

Panic grabs hold of Buck's throat and squeezes.

"You – *what*? Why?" He asks, taking steps further away from the house.

Rosie follows his lead. "I had to know why Bucky left."

"You are obsessed," Buck hisses. "He's *not* an outlaw."

"You don't know that," Rosie insists.

"I know a hell of a lot more than you," Gale fires.

The Deputy shakes his head. "I doubt that highly, Buck."

Buck frowns, shifts where he stands.

"What does that mean?" He asks, wary.

"I met the Sheriff," Rosie starts to explain, "a man named DeMarco. Asked if he knew a John Egan and he said that John Egan was wanted for *murder*."

He says it like its monumental. Buck, knowing this information already, ducks and shakes his head. "No, he's been framed."

"Framed?" Rosie says loudly. His eyes dart to the house, and he lowers his voice again. "He was standin' over a dead body with a pistol, drenched in a man's blood."

The wires in Gale's brain short-circuit, and he blinks in surprise. That

wasn't what Bucky had said. He'd said it was his friend, that he'd "just died" and Bucky had been randomly, wrongfully picked as the murderer. That was…all he'd said, really.

"That…ain't true," Gale says, looking up slowly.

"You sure?" Rosie asks. He doesn't say it unkindly. It's like he's broken bad news and thinks Buck's in denial. There's a pitying look on his face and Gale can't stand it.

"Yeah," he says, even though he's not. Doubt was creeping in. "I know it ain't, and I don't got to tell you any more than that."

Rosie puts his hands together, saint-like, steps close. "What is it about him that makes this so hard for you to believe?"

His hand in my hair, his breath on my neck, his chest against my back. His laugh in the sunlight, his smile reflected in the stars. Everything he's said, everything he hasn't, and a painful, deep-set want for more. More time, more flesh, more of him. He's under my skin, what else can I do?

Gale opens his mouth, tries to find an answer that won't make him sound down-right possessive, and can't.

"*Oh*," Rosie breathes, and recognition flickers in his eyes. "He's got you bad," he whispers, mournful. He sighs, turns to look towards the town, and places his hands on his hips. He subtly shakes his head, seeming lost in thought. "I won't have an outlaw in *my* town. He leaves, tonight, or I go back and tell his Sheriff where to find him."

Anger sparks down Buck's spine like a match.

"You wouldn't make it out of town," Gale threatens darkly.

The Deputy looks back towards him. The badge on his chest glows menacingly in the moonlight.

"You threatenin' a lawman, Buck? The Sheriff won't take too kindly to that."

The lawman and the liar; reprise.

"Get the hell off my ranch," Buck spits, turning and making his way back into his house.

-

When he walks through the door, Bucky's sat up in bed, arms wrapped around his knees.

"Where'd you go?" He asks innocently.

Gale looks him over.

"How much of that you hear?"

Bucky's façade splits. He smiles, but it's dull. "These walls ain't that thick."

Buck looks at him, wants so desperately to believe he'd told the truth. He wishes they were the only two people in town, that none of this mattered, that nothing mattered but them and the horses.

But far back in some blocked off corner of his brain, his trust in Rosie breaks free, despite everything. He just couldn't ignore it anymore – the way Bucky had been so resistant to offer any personal information, his vague version of events, his insistence that Rosie never find out. Rosie was a good Deputy, was a *good man*, and at the heart of it all he had nothing but good intentions. Gale's feelings towards Bucky were screaming at him to leave it alone, but he wanted truth. He didn't want to have to lie to everyone they met – that John was an old friend he hardly saw – he wanted a life with him. A real life.

All he'd do is ask, and let Bucky's reaction do the rest.

"Was it true?"

John frowns and gets out of the bed, coming to stand in front of him. He crosses his arms. "You really askin' me that?"

"Yeah, Bucky, I am, cos Rosie is a *damn* good Deputy and an honest man."

Bucky scoffs and looks away, running his tongue across his teeth. He taps his foot quickly, a nervous gesture.

"I believe you ain't done it," Gale continues softly, a soothing tone, "but you gotta tell me the truth. Don't you think I deserve that much?"

All of his anxious energy dissolves, and Bucky *crumbles*. His eyes squeeze shut, and he ducks his head, shaking it back and forth, mouth twisting.

“It was an accident,” he whispers.

Hope clings to Buck like a drowning man. If whatever Bucky had done hadn’t been his fault, maybe they could still save this. Maybe they could have more time.

“Tell me,” Gale begs, “*please*, Bucky.”

Bucky opens his eyes, and his gaze travels all across Gale’s face. Whatever he sees, he must trust, for he starts to speak, voice rough.

“There was this guy, some jackass, followed me home from the bar.” Bucky’s eyes slip to a spot on the floor, unseeing. “I tried walkin’ fast, but he caught up. Fella had a gun.”

Gale’s eyes flick to the floorboard under which the Colt slept. He says nothing. He can picture the scene – Bucky half-drunk, not quite quick enough. John continues quickly, a stream of consciousness.

“I – I don’t even know what he wanted; money or, somethin’ else, but he kept gettin’ closer and he wouldn’t listen when I told him to back off and he was *so* close I just…” He tightens his jaw, frowns so deeply, and Buck wants to reach into his mind and pluck whatever it is he’s seeing from his memory. “I just pushed him. He tripped, hit his head. I don’t even know what *on*, but, he ain’t get back up.”

Relief crashes through Buck like a locomotive.

It was self-defence. Bucky was so terrified of the law that he wouldn’t admit to self-defence. It was a harsh reality that Gale knew too many townsfolk related to.

Bucky’s breathing harder, still frowning, still staring at the space on the floor.

“I *tried*,” he hisses, “I tried to stop him bleedin’ but, *Christ*, heads can bleed *so* much. I picked up the gun, wanted to throw it away and come back for him, so if anyone saw they couldn’t say I killed him. Someone found us before I could, saw me with his blood on my hands and screamed. I just started runnin’.”

He doesn’t say anything more, just looks so sad.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gale asks gently.

Bucky shrugs, wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “I ain’t want

you to be scared of me."

Buck practically feels his own heart snap cleanly in two.

"Hey," Gale says softly, taking a step closer, "that was not your fault. You said it, you *tried*. You were defendin' yourself."

"No lawman's gon believe that," Bucky says bitterly.

"Rosie will."

"He *won't*."

"He will," Gale says, determined, and believes it. All Rosie had ever wanted was the honest truth, and knowing Bucky wasn't a killer, he was sure the Deputy would help them. He steps up, takes Bucky's face in his hands and makes the fire face him head on. "I will *make* him believe us. It's you and me, partner."

Bucky looks like he's going to fall apart. His eyes are glassy, wet with tears.

Gale runs a thumb across his cheek, wipes a stray tear, and repeats, so softly, "it's you and me."

Bucky kisses him.

It's desperate, like he was a starving man, and his hands grip Buck's waist so hard he feels like he'll bruise. He *wants* to, wants to have Bucky's hands on him forever, would rather suffocate in the kiss than ever come up for air. Bucky pulls him closer, pulls until their bodies are flush together and Gale's leaning back from the force. Gale slides his hands into Bucky's hair and thinks finally, *finally*.

Bucky's mouth is as warm as the rest of him, as eager as he is. His hands move, riding up Gale's shirt until they can get themselves on skin and *Jesus Christ*, how had they waited this long? It feels like John's very palms will burn handprints into his flesh. Buck decides with very little dignity that he wouldn't mind a lick if they did.

He tightens his grip in Bucky's hair and the man *whines*. It goes straight to Gale's gut. He catches Bucky's bottom lip in his teeth and pulls, wishing desperately to hear the sound again. John obliges him and it is glorious.

Gale removes a hand from Bucky's hair, much to his displeasure, and

grips his hip roughly to start pushing him backwards. They stumble, neither one of them daring to break the kiss, until Bucky's knees hit the edge of the bed and he's forced to tear himself away. He lands on the mattress, mouth red and bitten, looking up at Gale like he's the only thing in the world.

Gale reaches down a hand and drags his thumb over that mouth, and when Bucky's tongue chases it on the way past Buck finally, *truly* feels like a religious man. Bucky runs a hand up his thigh, painfully slow, and wraps a large hand around the leather of Gale's belt, hot fingers dipping into the waistline of his pants.

Bucky tugs him forward, and Gale follows him down.

Chapter End Notes

if you enjoyed leave a comment or come yell at me on tumblr @sig-nifier

Buck & Bucky

Chapter Summary

> “I like that please, John,” he says, putting a knee on the bed.
>
> “I thought you might,” he answers.

Chapter Notes

> and so the smut tag comes to join us. if ur NOT interested in the NSFW then please skip to the end of this chapter :))
>
> once again i must shout out @swifty-fox, whose done a seriously cool piece inspired by Bucky's confession last chapter. it's so dope to look at, the vibes are off the charts.
>
> https://www.tumblr.com/sig-nifier/745757847546183680/fuck-this-is-cool-i-love-the-red-background?source=share
>
> u know the drill
>
> -
>
> ALSO
>
> i'll be in london all day tomorrow, so theres a high chance there won't be a new chapter until monday. im very sorry pls forgive me <33

Gale lands in Bucky’s lap, and then they’re kissing again. Slowly, taking their time to learn the shape of each other’s tongues.

Bucky runs his hands back up underneath Gale’s shirt, and then down, dragging his nails as he goes. Buck gasps into his mouth at the feeling. It burns, every part of him that Bucky was touching burnt and it was so Goddamn satisfying after all this time that Gale barely managed to stop himself from finishing right then and there.

The man underneath him pulls his hands from under Gale’s shirt and takes hold of the neck of Buck’s jacket, pushing it backwards to slide it off his shoulders. Gale lets him, would let him do whatever he wanted so long as he kept touching him like that. The jacket lands unceremoniously on the floor. Bucky’s hands land tightly on Gale’s hips and *squeeze*.

Buck was aching from want, and he rolls his hips harshly against John's.

Bucky half moans, half winces at the sensation.

Gale pulls back from the kiss quickly, frowning.

"I'm okay," Bucky says quickly, and he sounds recked, "legs just still a little bruised."

"Shit." So caught up in his lust, Gale hadn't even realised he'd been sitting right on top of the injury. "Sorry."

Bucky shakes his head and leans forward, intent on kissing him once more, but before he can quite close the distance Gale stops him with a hand on his chest. Bucky whines, that delicious, tempting sound. They're inches apart, breathing in each other's air. When Gale doesn't let him get any closer, Bucky's tongue reaches out and licks Gale's bottom lip, and he almost loses all train of thought.

He trails his hand slowly down Bucky's chest, until he reaches the bottom of his shirt. He takes hold and pulls upward, and Bucky removes his hands from Buck's waist to let the shirt be pulled over his head.

Gale throws it somewhere behind him, and then carefully climbs off of Bucky's lap and gestures towards the pillows.

"Lie down," he says.

It looks like the words go straight to Bucky's brain, like the only thought behind his eyes is to follow Buck's command. He does, pushing himself back to lay down properly on the bed.

Gale takes a moment to look him over, this half-dressed man in his bed – *their* bed, and he takes the time to thank whichever Holy Being had sent Bucky to his stables.

Bucky squirms underneath his gaze.

"Buck," he groans, "*please*."

How could he say no?

"I like that please, John," he says, putting a knee on the bed.

Bucky's eyes slip shut, his jaw falls open and he exhales sharply before

his mouth twists into a temptress grin.

“I thought you might,” he answers.

Gale shifts his way up the bed until he’s straddling only Bucky’s left leg. He’s sure the other man can feel the hard press of his groin in his thigh, just as Gale can feel Bucky’s want with his knee. He presses his left knee forward and up, and John grunts at the sensation, body jolting.

Bucky starts to speak, but Buck leans down and swallows the words with a rough kiss. Their teeth clash, Bucky brings his hands up to grip either side of Gale’s head and digs his nails into the back of his skull. Buck grinds his hips against Bucky’s thigh, accidentally shifts his knee and they groan together. Gale repeats the action once, twice, three times until Bucky breaks the kiss to screw his eyes shut and tip his head back. He’s panting fiercely, and the image is quickly committed to Gale’s memory.

Buck takes Bucky’s wrists, removes his grip from Gale’s hair, and pins both of his arms firmly above his head.

Bucky laughs, a delighted, breathy sound, and opens his eyes to look at Buck through his lashes. He asks, siren-like, “what you gon do to me, *Gale*?”

Gale digs his knee in hard to the space between Bucky’s legs to wipe the smug look from his face. Bucky exhales like he was punched. His arms strain, but Gale keeps him exactly where he wants him. He leans in, going for a kiss, but just before their lips can touch, he tips his head to the side and starts pressing slow kisses into Bucky’s jaw.

John laughs again, and Gale feels it.

“You, suh, are gon be the death of me,” Bucky whispers.

Buck’s only response is to drag his teeth against the man’s racing pulse. Bucky tips his head back, giving him better access.

Gale stays there a long time, biting bruises into the soft flesh of Bucky’s throat until he is a squirming, writhing mess beneath him. John’s rolling his hips, trying to get a little bit of something, but Gale had shifted his knee just out of reach. Bucky mumbles incoherently, and Buck can just make out the words *Gale*, and *Christ*, and *please*.

Only when Bucky whines high in his throat and spits out “fuck”, only

then does Gale move down his chest, and further still.

He lets go of Bucky's arms to shift himself further down the bed, but before he can get far Bucky's grabbing his jaw and pulling him back up. They kiss, softly, and John's other hand starts to pull Buck's shirt up and over his head. Gale stops kissing him, lets the fabric be taken and thrown to join his jacket on the floor.

Hungry eyes travel all over his skin, and Gale can feel the heat that rises to his face.

Bucky smiles at him, a real smile, and traces a single finger over Buck's collarbone. Gale shivers at the touch and lets out a slow breath.

"Just like I dreamed," John murmurs.

Gale couldn't stop his smile if he tried. "You dream about me?"

Bucky brings a hand up and runs it gently through Gale's hair. "Only most nights."

It's, quite possibly, the most romantic thing he's ever heard. Buck kisses him, just once, just quickly, before sitting back on John's thigh and getting to work on his belt.

Together, the two of them carefully get Bucky out of his pants, and they too join the collection on the floor.

Gale looks over the wound. They weren't keeping it wrapped up anymore, and the yellow bruise could hardly be noticed on Bucky's pale skin.

"We can take those out, soon," Gale says, hovering his fingertips over the stitches.

Bucky looks at him, teasing. "We gotta do that right now?"

Buck laughs, bites back a grin. "No suh."

Gale moves back into place, knees either side of Bucky's thigh. Bucky's easy breathing from their laughter tightens in apprehension.

Buck was certainly no virgin, but this felt different. It felt like *they* would be different, after this, like everything they had said and done up till now couldn't be taken back anymore. Bucky watches him, licks his lips, and Gale decides he'd be perfectly alright with that.

Gale slips his hand into the only piece of clothing Bucky had left, and takes hold.

Bucky's eyes drift close, his head drops back onto the mattress, and he catches his bottom lip with his teeth. It is a filthy sight, and a dark lust overcomes Gale.

He tightens his grip and tugs slowly upwards, drawing a long moan from Bucky.

John opens his eyes and lifts his head to look down at what was happening to him. Seeing that he was yet to be completely rid of his clothes, he reaches down and pushes his underwear out of his way, down his thighs as far as he could manage. With Gale blocking his path, he simply rests his left hand on one of Bucky's thighs.

It should have been no surprise that Bucky was big.

He was fully hard, leaking and hot in Gale's hand. Buck slid his hand down Bucky's cock, right to the base where dark hair grew steady, and then back up again to the swollen head. He watched his own hand move as if it were someone else.

"*God*, that feels good," Bucky mumbles, eyes hooded as he watches Gale's hand move slowly up, and down.

"I hear you need a steady hand," Buck quips, twisting his wrist experimentally.

Bucky starts to laugh, but it quickly dissolves into a moan. Gale picks up the pace, only slightly, and Bucky twitches, groans, mutters things Gale couldn't make out. His hand on Buck's thigh squeezes and then slides up, to the blondes own solid length of desire. He palms him messily through the leather, and Gale's jaw drops open. He shifts forward, closer, to give Bucky an easier reach.

Bucky pulls his hand away and licks a stripe from the bottom of his palm to his fingertips before shoving it roughly into the front of Gale's pants and working him over quickly.

Gale can't concentrate, can't get his own arm to move in the steady rhythm he'd set. He tries, *tries* to time his strokes with Bucky's, but it's messy and uncoordinated. He shuts his eyes, focuses on the sounds he was pulling from the other man, the heat in his hand, the rough palm jacking him tightly.

For a while, there's just that, skin on skin, their moans mixing in the air. It's a dirty sound, but Gale feels washed clean, pure, like this was what it meant when people said the word holy. He'd never thought about Heaven, about what he might feel when the time finally comes, but in this moment, he prays it feels like this.

"You…*fuck*…you got any oil?" Bucky asks, eyes closed, face screwed up in pleasure and concentration.

"Kitchen," Gale forces out, only able to manage the one word.

It looks like it takes him all of his effort, but Bucky lets go of Gale, pulls his hand out, and wraps his wet, sticky grip around Buck's still moving wrist to stop him.

"Go get it."

Gale blinks, can hardly comprehend what Bucky's implying. His mouth is so dry, his whole body burns with lust. He licks his lips, swallows. "You wanna–"

"I think I'll die if we don't," Bucky says seriously.

Buck starts to get up, to head for the cupboard in the kitchen where he knows the oil lives. Bucky catches his arm and pulls him down for a kiss before he goes.

Gale crosses to the kitchen with his heart thundering. He's so nervous, nervous that he'll get it wrong, that it won't be any good, that John will laugh at him. He shakes those thoughts from his head as he pulls the cupboard door open, thinks of Bucky's encouraging moans and tight grip.

When he gets back, Bucky has rid himself of his underwear completely. He's waiting, not even touching himself without Gale there. The power goes straight to Gale's head, and he makes a mental note to do something with that, later.

Bucky smiles at him.

"Well, howdy," he says easily.

Something blooms, warm, gentle, deep on the left side of Gale's chest, and he thinks it feels a lot like love.

He hands Bucky the oil when he gets close, before pulling both his

pants and underwear down in one fluid motion, and stepping out of them.

"God*damn*." Bucky whistles at him, does nothing to hide the obviousness of his stare.

Gale rolls his eyes, flushing wine-red, and joins him on the bed once more.

With Gale positioned in-between Bucky's legs, they kiss for a while, gently, like nervous teenagers. When it starts to get heated, when Bucky digs his nails into Gale's shoulder blades and *drags* and Buck groans into his open mouth, that's when Buck leans back, takes the oil from John, uncaps it, and pours it generously onto his hand.

He strokes himself, tips his head back and moans, just to give Bucky something to think about, before he's spreading John open, taking the same hand and pushing two fingers past the pink ring of Bucky's hole.

He watches his fingers disappear, past the first knuckle, the second, until he's in as far as he can get.

Bucky looks like bliss. His hands are gripping the bedsheets tightly, his mouth open, his eyes closed. His jaw moves, trying to form words, and Buck scissors his fingers, just to watch the way John's jaw snaps closed as he groans.

He stays like that for a while, slowly pulling and pushing with his fingers, spreading them inside of Bucky, until the man is sweating and pushing back onto his hand, desperately trying to get Gale to pick up the pace.

Gale pulls his fingers almost completely out, lines up with a third, and pushes back in.

Bucky practically *sobs*. His legs hook behind Gale, as if to pull him closer, and Buck rewards his show of enthusiasm by fingering him harder and faster.

John's moans are obscene, coming quick and high in his throat, and Buck takes himself in his free hand, pumping in time with his other. His teeth bite into his lower lip, and he breathes heavily through his nose.

Bucky must hear him, for he opens his eyes and stares, whatever breath he had left leaves him in a long groan, and with a shaky voice

he manages to say: “Jesus *Christ*, Gale, you’re killin’ me.”

That’s all the encouragement Buck needs.

He pulls his fingers out, wipes them on the inside of Bucky’s thigh, and shifts closer, lining himself up.

“You tell me if I hurt you,” he says, looking Bucky in the face.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky says quickly, impatient.

“I *mean* it,” Gale insists, stern.

“Yes*suh*,” Bucky breathes, and the words go straight to Buck’s cock.

Gale pushes himself inside Bucky, and it’s like the world spins.

He sinks in, further and further, until his hips are flush against Bucky’s ass, until he is completely consumed and the only word that could possibly exist in his mind is *John, John, John*.

It’s a wonder he doesn’t finish right there, caught in the heat and the wet.

He’s never felt anything like it, in both body and soul. He places gentle hands on Bucky’s hips, and the man is fever hot, burning like a wild thing. It’s like holding a naked flame in your hand and barely standing the fervour, like placing your palm on a red-hot stove and tasting your flesh in the air.

“Buck,” a far-away voice calls, begs, “*move*.”

Gale blinks, and there is Bucky, trapped beneath him. John reaches up with a sweaty hand and wipes across Buck’s cheek with his thumb.

“You okay?” He asks.

Gale leans down and kisses him.

The motion shifts them, and static blooms across the back of Gale’s eyelids. Bucky gasps into his mouth and Buck, intent on drawing that sound again, starts to oblige him.

It’s slow at first, romantic. Buck pulls away from the kiss, looks in the ocean of Bucky’s irises and watches the waves crash against the shore. Bucky brings his hands up and weaves his fingers into the hair on the back of Gale’s head. John’s stare is intense, like he’s trying to

communicate all his feeling without saying a word. *Me too*, Gale thinks, and hopes he gets it. Gale places one of his hands on the right side of Bucky's head to keep from collapsing on top of him. The other hand stays by his left hip, pulling him against him each time Gale thrusts.

Bucky hooks his uninjured leg across Gale's back, draws him in deeper, and Buck must hit a particularly good spot, because Bucky's grip suddenly tightens in his hair and he moans filthily.

"Yeah?" Gale groans, snapping his hips forward and back, harder and faster.

"*Yeah*, Buck," comes Bucky's spent reply.

Buck keeps up his newfound relentless pace, ducks his head to John's neck and bites the pretty bruises that decorated his skin. It feels incredible, *he* feels incredible, whining beneath him, so tight. He must hit that spot again, Bucky whimpers, and after that he aims for it, pounding into it again and again. Bucky's breath starts coming faster. He curses, squeezes his eyes shut tightly and pulls on Buck's hair so hard that he has no choice but to lean his head back.

Gale takes his hand from Bucky's hip and wraps it around his dick, starts stroking him hard and fast, in time with his own cock driving in and out of him.

It doesn't last much longer after that.

"Fuck, *fuck*," Bucky groans, and then he's spilling hot and white all over their stomachs and Gale's hand. His whole body tenses and Gale *feels* it, the way he tightens on his cock, the way pleasure builds faster and faster in his gut. Bucky, still with his hands in Gale's hair, pulls viciously, and then Buck's moaning low in his throat and his hips are stuttering and he's *gone*.

He collapses on top of Bucky, legs useless, and breathes heavily. Underneath him, John's doing the same.

"My *God*," he mumbles into the sweaty crook of Bucky's neck.

"Nah," Bucky sighs, breathless, and Buck can hear the smile in his voice, "just me."

-

Afterwards, when they've cleaned themselves up and stripped the bed of its sheets, throwing them, too, to the floor, they lay on the bare mattress in the dark, and they talk.

"I've wanted to do that since you lifted me onto that horse," Bucky admits.

Gale looks at him, remembers the way he'd held John's hips, the way he'd frozen at the contact. He smirks at the memory and shakes his head.

"What took you so long?" Buck teases.

"I ain't want to come on too strong," Bucky defends, voice going high.

Gale chuckles. "I damn well wish you had. Would've saved me a whole lot of thoughts."

"God forbid you do *any* thinkin'," Bucky teases, poking him in the ribs.

Gale flinches, pokes him right back, and then the two of them are giggling like children, a mess of hands and limbs. They end up lying on their sides, face to face.

Bucky goes to poke Gale's cheek. Buck catches his hand and presses a kiss to his outstretched finger.

"God, Buck," John laughs softly, "I weren't prepared for you to be sweet." He sighs, something sad to it, almost mournful.

"Oh, I'm sweeter than sugar," Gale jokes, trying to make him smile. He shifts his hold on Bucky's hand until their fingers were laced together.

Bucky does smile, so fondly it makes Gale's heart ache. He cups the side of Gale's face.

"I really have enjoyed knowin' you, Buck," he says, seriously.

Buck smiles, a soft thing. "Don't you worry. There's a whole lot more knowin' to be done."

John looks over every inch of his face, strokes his cheek with his thumb, before leaning in and kissing him deeply.

-

Gale wakes in the morning, cold, and alone. He sits up, rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. There's no sign of Bucky, and a note balanced gently on the pillow to his left.

Sorry.

Boeing

Chapter Summary

> The truth was, Bucky simply hadn't seen a good enough reason to stay.

Chapter Notes

> apologies for the wait. enjoy :)

The worst part, Gale thinks, is that Bucky took Boeing.

He'd got dressed in a haste, laced his boots all wrong, and torn out into the stables. The white horse's box was empty and Gale's eyes had filled with tears. He'd turned around and kicked the stable door harshly, rattling the wood and spooking the horses.

There are, actually, far worse parts to all of this, but if Gale thought about those too long he'd have to kill the next man he saw, and he couldn't catch Bucky if he was swinging from a tree.

So, Boeing.

"Rat bastard," Gale had growled, digging his nails tightly into his palms to stop himself from catching splinters in his knuckles. He'd made his way back outside, down the path and past his house, an inferno burning in the centre of his chest. This was entirely one person's fault, and it was about to become that man's problem. Gale had kept walking, fire on his breath and blame in his heart, right until he had reached the Deputy's front door.

-

It takes seven rough pounds to the door before Rosie's pulling it open, looking concerned.

"Christ–"

Gale shoves him hard in the chest, sending Rosie stumbling backwards into his own house.

"You couldn't just leave things alone, could you, *Deputy*?" He spits, advancing on the man.

Rosie rubs his chest where Buck had hit him. To his credit, he doesn't step back when Gale gets right up into his face.

"This is about Bucky," he says carefully.

"Give the man a silver star," Gale calls out mockingly.

Rosie raises a slow hand between them, hovers it over Buck's chest. "I know you're upset, but–"

"*Upset*? Now, why on *Earth* would I be upset?" Gale sneers.

There's a spring deep in his gut, coiling itself tighter and tighter. He can hardly breathe, can hardly see Rosie stood right in front of him for the rage spinning inside of him. He knows what the anger is covering for, knows that if he lets it, something else will take over, but he doesn't want that. Anger was easy, it was cruel words and crueller fists. You didn't need to think with anger, didn't need to do anything but feel it, and *God* did Bucky *feel* it.

"I get it," Rosie says, speaking like he did to the widows whose husbands had been unfairly executed. "He was your friend, but, Buck, he was a *murderer*."

The blaze inside of him roars. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears, taste blood on his teeth. Gale grabs the front of Rosie's shirt and hauls him close, almost headbutting him with the force.

"It was *self-defence*!" He yells, shaking the Deputy roughly. "It weren't even his gun! Some jackass jumped him and when Bucky pushed him away the idjit hit his dumbass head."

Rosie looks confused and he blinks rapidly.

"The…the Sheriff said–"

"The Sheriff's a damn liar." He pushes Rosie away from him and turns his back, putting his hand over his mouth and trying to breathe through his nose. There's silence behind him. He knows logic and reason must be racing through the Deputy's mind, trying to put the evidence together.

Gale lets him.

"Are you sure?" Rosie asks after a moment.

He wants to say Bucky wouldn't lie, but he had, once before. Even

after *this*, Gale still wanted to defend him.

“Pretty damn sure, yeah."

Another pause.

Rosie sighs shakily.

“I ain’t think he’d be like Harding,” Rosie says quietly, horrified, “He seemed nice. I thought…I hoped he’d be better.”

He sounds so heartbroken. Gale’s anger fizzles, replaced with what he couldn’t name, starts to clear the way for the things he knew.

Deputy Rosenthal is a good and honest man. He wants to believe other lawmen are good and honest too. He thought he was doing the right thing, and it’s not his fault that the majority of men who wear the badge are crooked.

The truth was, Bucky simply hadn’t seen a good enough reason to stay.

The realisation hits him like a locomotive. He squeezes his eyes shut, presses his hand tightly to his mouth. It doesn’t help. The first gasp hurts his throat. The second racks his whole chest.

A deep, profound sadness settles itself neatly between his ribs, and his heart.

He’d thought they could work it out together, that whoever came looking for Bucky would have to face the two of them united. He thought he’d found something with John, a real something that could defy the odds simply because it was *them*. In such a short time, Bucky had felt like an extension of himself, and without him, he was off-balance. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do now, how he was supposed to live in a post-Bucky world.

He'd thought Bucky had felt the same.

Suddenly, Rosie is in front of him, hands on his shoulders, an alarmed, greatly regretful look on his face.

“Buck, I-“ His mouth moves, trying to form the right words, but he cuts himself off with a sigh. “I’m just so sorry. This is my fault.”

Gale takes his hand from his mouth, grips one of Rosie’s wrists tightly to keep himself steady.

“Did you…do you…*love* him?” Rosie asks, carefully.

How could I not? How could anyone spend a second in the summer of Bucky’s heart and not want to build a home?

Buck doesn’t think he can say it out loud. He squeezes Rosie’s wrist. He nods.

Rosie’s eyes slip closed. The frown on his face is one of sorrow and guilt.

“I didn’t know,” he whispers.

Gale sniffs. He feels heavy, empty, like the full weight of Bucky’s leaving was trying to pull him down into the dirt. He wanted to let it.

“You’re a shitty detective,” he says. It’s supposed to be funny, but all he can think is, *was it not obvious?*

He should have said it. He should have *said* the words. Maybe then, John wouldn’t have left. Maybe he’d have said it back, and they’d still be together now, laying in bed, trying to convince the other to get up and make coffee.

Or, maybe he wouldn’t have.

Maybe Bucky had simply been waiting until he felt well enough to get away, and he was just taking what he could whilst he had the chance. Maybe he’d have left anyway.

It’s a bitter thought, not one he thinks he fully believes, but there currently wasn’t much room for optimism.

Rosies hands squeeze Gale’s shoulders tightly, and when Gale flicks damp eyes up to look at him, there is a fierce determination set in the Deputy’s face.

“I am gon fix this,” he says, and he declares it with such conviction that Gale can’t help but want to believe him.

A spark of hope lights the dark.

-

Only an hour later, the two of them were riding at a gallop, side by side. The wind whipped at their faces and Gale could already feel the sting of red on his cheeks.

In the stables, before they left, confusion had crossed Rosie's features before realisation quickly took its place.

"He took Boeing?"

Gale couldn't even look at the horse's empty stall. He keeps his eyes on Fortress. He says nothing.

"…Maybe he wanted to take a bit of you with him?"

Rosie, always the romantic. He was trying to give Gale hope, trying to soften the anger that he could see etched into his face.

Gale points to Hundreth. "Get him ready."

For two hours they rode, not saying a word, until they came to where they knew they would have to part ways. They slow to a stop.

"Sure you know where to find him?" Rosie asks.

Gale thinks back to when John had recounted the journey of his escape, and says, "I got some idea."

Rosie nods.

"Sure your guy'll help us?" Gale asks in return.

The plan had been entirely Rosie's idea. The man was intent on fixing things, on bringing Bucky home safely to Lemmon and he was calling in a big favour to do it.

That fierce determination crosses Deputy Rosenthal's face once more. "I won't let him say no."

Gale realises with a crushing intensity how deeply he'd missed his friend.

"Rosie," he says.

"Yeah, Buck?"

"I…thank you."

It's all that needs to be said.

Rosie nods, smiles at him a little softly.

“Bring him home,” Rosie says before turning away and kicking Hundreth into a gallop.

“Yessuh,” Gale breathes, turning Fortress in the opposite direction.

-

At midday, the Cheyenne river sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. Grassy banks stretched for miles. Green and grey rocks dipped their toes in the river’s surface, lining the water’s edge.

Gale brings Fortress to a canter, scanning the river bank in all directions. The sun was on him at all angles and he could feel his shirt sticking to his back. He squints, focused, continuing to travel alongside the river.

He does this for what feels like hours, and then, in the distance, he sees him.

A shadow silhouette. A snow-white horse.

Relief.

Indignation.

Buck picks up his pace once more, getting closer and closer. Bucky’s crouched by the river, dipping his hands in the water and running them through his hair, across the back of his neck. At some point, hearing the horse’s hooves on the stone, Bucky looks up.

Gale tugs the reigns, brings Fortress to a stop when he gets close enough, and slides down off the horse.

Boeing snorts, shakes her head, stamps her feet. She looks okay, and Gale lets himself breathe a little more.

Bucky, on the other hand.

He stands up straight and turns to face him, putting the river behind him. He stares at Gale like a caught child. There’s a light sunburnt across the bridge of his nose. The colour looks good on him.

Gale has so many things he wants to say, and suddenly he can’t decide on which. Fury, or forgiveness. Rage, or reassurance.

Bucky takes a breath, opens his mouth to speak.

Gale walks right up and shoves him backwards into the water.

Bucky falls, is briefly submerged before reappearing with a gasp. He coughs, stumbles to his feet – the water was shallow enough to stand – flicks his head to get his hair out of his eyes.

"Why'd you do that?" He cries.

"Why'd I– *Why'd I do that*?" Gale repeats, exasperated.

Bucky wades out of the river, not looking at him, running both hands through his hair to slick it back. "You shouldn't have come."

"You took my horse," Buck spits, bitter.

"I ain't think you'd mind," Bucky says, soft.

Gale genuinely feels insane. He feels like the only normal person in the whole of South Dakota. He wants to slap Bucky, wants to hold him under water and make him see, wants to pull him out at the last second and kiss his gasping mouth.

"Oh, I *mind*, John," he replies, cold. "I mind *very* much when someone says all these pretty things and then – and then – *takes me to bed* before stealin' my favourite horse!"

Bucky does look at him then, shocked, sad.

"I didn't..." He trails off, voice quiet.

Gale crosses his arms and scoffs. He says, hotly, "didn't *what*? Cos that's exactly what you've done."

"I didn't mean for it to look like that," John says, earnest.

He wants to believe him. He always does, but look where that had got him.

"What was it supposed to look like?" Gale questions. "If you…" he falters, and he hates himself for it, "if it didn't *mean* anythin' –"

Bucky is quick to interrupt him. "It did. Havin' you, that meant somethin' to me. I mean – Christ – Gale, you're the only thing that ever has. Can't you *see* that? I'm tryin' to protect you."

He's looking at Buck, so scared, so capable of loss. His clothes are soaking wet. Water is running from his temple down the side of his

face. That had happened once before, when Gale had wiped a wet cloth across his bloody eyebrow. He'd caught the droplet with his thumb, then.

It softens him. It would be so easy to believe him, easy to fall back into his arms and accept. But he can't. Not when Bucky had made this so hard.

"So your solution is to run away," he says, mean.

"It's how I found you, ain't it?" Bucky gives him a small smile, trying to be charming. Gale grits his teeth, tries desperately to ignore the way John was worming himself into his chest.

"Onto the next easy thing, is it?" He questions back, throat tight.

Bucky looks horrified, a mirror image of Rosie's earlier expression.

"Jesus, Gale, *no*. I ain't wanna leave, but if they knew you'd been helpin' me, if they found us together, you'd be hung, and I-" He cuts himself off with a scoff. His hands on his hips, he shakes his head, jaw clenching.

"You'd what?" Gale urges.

Say it say it say it.

Bucky looks at him, really looks at him, and the full weight of his attention is like being stared down by a God.

"I would destroy anyone who even came close to harmin' you," he says, slow, dangerous.

Gale's heart is racing. The words go straight to his chest, shatter all of his resolve in a single swing.

"Why?" He asks, voice barely a whisper.

Bucky exhales, a little smile breaking the seriousness of his face.

"Does it need sayin'?"

Adrenaline is flowing through him like the river, steady, and strong. He feels like he's on the precipice of some great moment, like whatever Bucky says next will fix everything, or damn them both.

"Yes," Gale insists.

Bucky nods, slow, considerate. He walks up, slides his cold, damp hands either side of Buck's jaw. His eyes flick back and forth between Gale's. Ocean blue. He pulls Gale closer until their lips are brushing. What he says next is no secret, but he whispers it anyway. "Because I love you."

I love you I love you.

Gale thinks of the man who had climbed the rafters of a stable with a bullet in his leg to keep Buck from being caught lying to a Sheriff. He thinks of the easy liar, sat in a bar, spinning webs for a Deputy so Gale could keep his friendship intact. He thinks of the note on his pillow, it's single scrawled word saying everything, and nothing at all.

Bucky was trying to protect him.

That, he could believe.

Gale shuts his eyes, tips his head forward, rests his forehead against Bucky's, lets the wet of the river cool his fever skin.

"You ain't gon say it back?" Bucky laughs, quiet, nervous.

"Does it need sayin'?" Buck repeats.

Bucky pulls his face away, tips his head, smiles warm and adoring. "Oblige me."

Gale wraps a hand in Bucky's drenched shirt and pulls him in. The kiss is just as wet.

When they pull away, unfortunately needing to breathe, Gale says, seriously, "I love you. You ain't never gettin' away from me again."

Bucky's smile could have outshined the sun. "You promise?"

"John."

"Hm?"

"I was talkin' to the horse."

Bucky's laughter rings like a church bell.

-

“I told you I’d bring you here,” Bucky says, ripping grass out of the ground and letting it go on the wind.

“Would have been nice to get an invite,” Gale replies, only somewhat bitterly.

They were sat a little ways from the river, back where the grass grew green and there were less rocks. They’d talked a little more. John had explained that he had taken Boeing to remember Gale by, had hoped that Gale would understand why he’d left and forgive him for it and think of him often. He said he’d planned to come back, one day, when it seemed like enough time had passed. *I could never leave you for good*. Bucky had apologised profusely for his exit seeming in such poor taste. Each apology had come with a kiss, and Gale had forgiven him a little more with each one.

“Rosie knows,” Gale says after a moment of quiet, looking at the water. He’d been thinking about how to drop the news and decided there was simply no easy way. “The truth, I mean. He’s gon help.”

Bucky thinks this over quietly. He doesn’t look surprised. The rushing of the river was a nice sound, gentle in it’s violence. Gale was glad he’d come.

After a while, Bucky asks: “You think we can trust him?”

We. Buck liked the sound of that. He nods.

“I do. I was, God, I was furious with him but, when I think rationally, I know why he did it. He looked damn regretful when I told him the truth. He came up with a solid plan.”

“What’s that?”

“Rosie knows a Governor in Rapid City, thinks he can help.”

“Thinks?” Bucky quotes back to him, looking doubtful.

“It’s the best we got,” Gale sighs.

A gentle breeze rolls through and Bucky shivers. He was mostly dry now, and his hair had curled nicely.

“You forgive him?” John plucks a daisy from the ground, twirls it in his fingertips.

“If everythin’ goes to plan, I will.”

“And if not?”

Gale shrugs. “Don’t suppose I’ll live long enough to care.”

Bucky frowns. “Don’t talk like that. I’ll tell them I threatened you into it.”

“You won’t,” Buck says, stern. “I told you it was you and me and I damn well meant it.”

“Buck…”

“I don’t want to live in a world that I can’t have a future with you in,” Gale states with finality.

Something crosses Bucky’s face. He sniffs, tries to smile. “Damn poet.”

“I could go on the road with it.”

Bucky really does smile then. “You certainly could.”

They watch the river. It flows, unrelenting, unchanging. Boeing and Fortress graze the ground, content.

“We could just stay,” Bucky suggests.

Gale huffs a laugh.

“I’m serious,” the man continues, “I’d build you a house out of sticks and stones.”

“Really?” Buck draws out the word, smiling.

“Oh, I’d do just about anythin’. If you kiss me, that is.”

Gale does. It’s nice.

It really *is* nice, and he really would like to stay, but they had to go back. They couldn’t run any longer. Rosie was going to return with good news, he was, and finally, *finally*, they could start living.

“A’right,” Gale gets to his feet, rubs loose grass from his pants and extends a hand down to John. “Ready?”

Bucky reaches up and slides his hand into his. “Take me home,

partner.”

Deputy Rosenthal (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

They played a lot of cards, waiting for Rosie to come home.

Chapter Notes

another NSFW warning for this one.

the penultimate chapter!

“Hold *still*.”

“It feels *weird*.”

“I’m almost done.”

Gale lightly clutches the final stitch with his pair of tweezers and pulls. The thread comes free, and just like that, Bucky’s leg was as good as new. Gale pours whiskey on the cloth he held and wipes down Bucky’s thigh gently.

Bucky peers down at his own leg. There was a scar, but other than that, it was like it never happened.

“So, I’ll live?” He asks with a playful smile.

Gale returns it. “You’ll live.”

It had been two days since they’d got back to Lemmon, and still, there was no sign of Rosie.

Gale was trying not to worry. He was sure it took longer than a few hours to sort out the kind of paperwork Rosie had set his heart on, and that was only after the Governor had agreed to help him. The Deputy had an unwavering faith in his ability to get this done, and he had good reason. A few years back, Rosie had been passing through Rapid City. He wasn’t supposed to be there for long, but had accidentally gotten himself involved in a case of serial murders spreading throughout the town and couldn’t find it in his heart to leave. Rosie worked closely with the lawmen of the city, eventually leading the charge to catch the outlaw, and save the lives of the Governor and his wife in the process. Because of this, the Governor regarded him highly, and trusted his word implicitly.

Rosie was to explain the situation to the man, and in return (and theory), the Governor would write John Egan a pardon that declared him an innocent man. Anyone who came looking for Bucky after that would do it with the risk of being hung if they harmed him.

So, Buck wasn't worried. He did wish Rosie would hurry up, however.

Bucky had taken to waking constantly throughout the night, claiming he'd heard someone outside. Each time, Gale went out to check, and each time there was nobody there. He knew Bucky was paranoid his Sheriff would show up, or that Rosie would return empty handed. He tried desperately to keep him distracted, but there was only so much he could do to influence the other man's dreams.

-

They played a lot of cards, waiting for Rosie to come home. Sitting on their bed, facing each other cross-legged, Gale taught Bucky how to play Sevens, and promptly beat him at every game.

"You can't put that there."

"*Why*?"

"Cos I ain't placed the four yet."

"Well hurry up, would you?"

Buck laughs softly, shaking his head. "I'm tryna win."

Bucky leans his head back and groans. He looks back to Gale, a bored look on his face. "You've won every game."

"Cos *you* ain't got no strategy," Gale teases, placing the eight of diamonds above the seven.

Bucky huffs, resting his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand.

"What's wrong?" Gale asks, amused.

Bucky fixes him with a piercing look. "I can't go," he says sulkily.

The corners of Buck's mouth pinch, trying to hold back his smile. He places another card.

Eye's flicking from the cards in his hand to the ones laid out on the bed, a tiny, mischievous smile forms on his face.

“Would you look at that? It’s my turn,” he says happily.

Gale frowns, looking at his own cards. “You shouldn’t be able to go–“

Bucky swipes his hand across all of the cards in front of them and tackles Gale backwards. The cards he was holding are knocked from his hand.

“Bucky!” Gale chastises, laughing.

John scrambles to straddle Gale’s waist, grabs his wrists and pins them down by his head. He grins down at him.

“Think this means I win.”

“It means you’re a Goddamn cheater,” Gale laughs, trying to free his arms. Bucky’s grip only tightens.

He leans down, closer, and when he spoke his breath was warm on Gale’s face. “What do I get for winnin’?”

Gale tries to shift his arms again, just to feel the way Bucky leant on him a little harder to keep him still. He licks his lips. “Whatever you want.”

Bucky smiles, liking his answer, and leans down to kiss him sweetly. The kiss is so gentle compared to the pressure he’s putting on Gale’s arms that it makes Buck’s head spin. Bucky pulls back and just looks at him, lovingly.

“I want as much of you as I can get,” he whispers.

Gale knows why he says it. He knows what he’s thinking about, what he hasn’t stopped thinking about since they returned.

“You got all of me,” Gale says, and means it. He’s never meant anything more in his life.

Bucky kisses him again, taking his time. Its slow, messy, like they had all the time in the world to waste. Bucky slides his hands from Gale’s wrists to his palms, interlocking their fingers. They kiss until Gale starts to feel lightheaded, and then Bucky’s kissing across his face, down his jaw, down his neck.

It’s unbearable. It feels like worship, and when Bucky drags his teeth across his skin, when he bites down and sucks a dark spot into his throat, the sound he pulls from Gale sounds like a prayer.

Bucky licks the bruise and then breathes cool onto Gale's neck. Buck shivers, wondering if this was how Bucky had felt when Gale had done the same to him.

John moves further down, unlaces his hands from Gale's to undo the blonde's belt.

Gale sits up on his elbows, heart racing greyhound-quick in anticipation.

Bucky grips either side of Gale's pants and pulls. Buck lifts his hips, and Bucky brings the fabrics to rest around his thighs. He was already embarrassingly hard, like a virgin glimpsing an ankle.

With Bucky just looking at him, admiring, heat rushes to his face, and he wills him to do something. He wouldn't beg, he never did.

Bucky runs the palm of his hand lightly over the leaking head of Buck's cock and Gale gasps, hips rising involuntarily to chase the feeling. Bucky smiles, something malicious in it. He repeats the action, and Gale's body repeats the response.

He wouldn't beg. He wouldn't.

Bucky's cruel eyes lock with his, and then he's sinking down, down, down, opening his mouth and *oh*.

Gale shuts his eyes and groans, can't bear to look at Bucky as he bobs his head. It feels obscene, and when he listens to the wet sounds of John's mouth on his cock he thinks it'll be seared into his brain.

He breathes fast, tries to take steady breaths and fails. He settles back down off his elbows, opens his eyes, and slides a hand into Bucky's hair, trying to gain some sense of control.

Bucky slides up, wraps a hand around the base of Gale's dick and squeezes at the same time he sucks harshly on his head. Gale tightens his grip, *feels* Bucky moan around him, and groans long and deep from his chest.

He sets a slow pace after that, a torturous drag of his hand and mouth that frustrates Gale beautifully. Buck tries to speed him along, tries to pull him by the hair but Bucky resists. He's having far too much fun, actually *laughs* with Gale in his mouth, and the vibrations send sparks flying behind his eyes.

“Bucky…” Gale warns, and the menace teasing him doesn’t pause in his work, simply flicks his eyes up to Buck’s and hums.

It makes Gale jolt. Bucky doesn’t even flinch when the buck of Gale’s hips sends his cock further down his throat.

John pulls off and Gale is both grateful and vexed by the pause.

“Why don’t you say *please*,” Bucky suggests lightly, licking a stripe from the base of him to the tip.

Gale grits his teeth at the sensation, at the burning humiliation that pools in his gut and makes his cock flinch. He doesn’t trust himself to speak. He shakes his head.

Bucky smirks, and sinks back down.

It feels like he holds Gale there for hours, not at all moving quick enough, not at all responding to Gale’s threats and hand in his hair. Each time Buck gets close, starts gasping faster and faster, Bucky pulls away, spoils the moment, and asks him to say *please*. And each time, Gale says no.

He’s sweating, tears are threatening to run from the corner of his eyes. It feels so good, hurts so bad. He feels like he’s standing on the edge of a cliff, not moving, but waiting for a strong enough breeze to simply knock him over the side.

Bucky removes his hand, takes the entirety of Gale into his mouth, and *swallows*.

A tear slides traitorously down Gale’s face as his orgasm is finally coaxed from him. Bucky doesn’t move until he’s done, until his hips have stopped stuttering and he’s relaxed, boneless on the mattress.

John pulls off, grins, and wipes his lip with his thumb.

Through the haze, Gale makes a very long list of all the things he was going to do to him.

Bucky slinks back up his body, says “you’re gon say it for me one day, Buck,” and Gale is grabbing him by the jaw and flipping them over.

-

“What if he don’t come back?” Bucky asks afterwards, shirtless, bedsheets wrapped around his waist.

There was only so much distracting Gale could do.

“He will,” he says, sure. He was sat on his pillow, leaning against the back wall. Bucky had his head rested on his thigh.

“How do you know?” Bucky says, quiet.

“He said he would,” Gale answers simply, before continuing, “Rosie has an annoyin’ habit of being right about everythin’. Well, most of the time, anyway.”

Bucky huffs. “Not about me.”

“We did lie to him,” Buck argues, “he weren’t entirely wrong.”

“Still, he–“

Gale cuts him off. He places a hand in his hair and strokes, doing what he can to tame the growing fire inside of Bucky.

“I get it,” he says, “you don’t trust him and I get that, but you didn’t see him, Bucky. His determination, his regret. You don’t know him.”

Bucky stays quiet.

“But you will,” Gale continues, “cos he’s gon come back here with that pardon and you’re gon be stuck with him for a real long time.”

That earns him a small laugh. It feels like a victory.

“And you, I hope?” Bucky cranes his neck to look up at him.

Gale brushes the hair out of his eyes, smiles. “And me.”

-

They were cleaning up from dinner when it happens.

Bucky holds a towel in his hand, drying the plates and mugs and cutlery that Gale hands him.

There’s a knock at the front door.

Gale drops the plate he was washing into the sink, is grateful it chooses not to break. Bucky whips his head around so fast Gale thinks it’s a wonder he doesn’t break his neck.

They stare at the wood, neither one of them moving.

The knock comes a second time.

Slowly, Gale pulls the towel from Bucky's hands and dries his own. He places it down on the countertop.

"Don't move," Gale says, quiet.

Bucky nods, swallows.

Buck crosses the floor, grips the handle, pulls the door open, just slightly.

Deputy Rosenthal is stood on his doorstep, panting.

Gale sighs in relief, pulling the door open fully so Bucky can see it's just Rosie. He hears the man exhale behind him.

"Never thought I'd be glad to see you," Bucky quips shakily as Rosie steps into the house. Gale closes the door behind him.

He looks windswept, like he'd been riding hard for hours. He looks the same way he did when he'd shown up at midnight to kick Bucky out of Lemmon. He's panting hard, trying to catch his breath. He comes to a stop in front of Bucky.

"Well?" Gale presses, coming to face the Deputy next to Bucky.

Rosie starts to nod, starts to smile, starts to reach inside his jacket.

Beside him, Bucky reaches across and grabs Gale's wrist.

From his pocket, Rosie pulls a ripped open envelope.

"Is that it?" Bucky asks.

"Yeah," Rosie sighs. He hands it over and Bucky takes it quickly, pulls the letter out, unfolds it and starts reading fast.

"Took me so long, cos," Rosie starts to explain, his breathing under control, "I went to Sioux Falls to show your Sheriff."

Bucky's eyes slide slowly from the paper to the Deputy. "…You did?"

"Yessuh."

“And?” Gale insists, desperate to hear the whole story.

“He seemed *real* scared of the Governor,” Rosie reassures.

Bucky’s still staring at Rosie, an odd look on his face.

“So, that means –“ Gale starts to say, turning to Bucky.

“You are, officially, *not* an outlaw,” Rosie finishes. “Congrats, Mr Egan.”

Gale can see the moment the realisation sinks into John. He blinks, looks from Rosie to Gale to Rosie and back again. When his gaze falls on Buck, he *grins*.

Gale grins right on back, relief and fondness flooding him like rain.

Bucky turns back to Rosie, gratitude and disbelief on his face. “Thank you, Deputy, sincerely.”

Rosie grins. It was one of the brightest smiles Buck had ever seen the Deputy wear. He reaches inside his jacket once more and pulls out a second envelope.

“Actually,” he says, “it’s *Sheriff*.”

Gale Cleven

Chapter Summary

> Gale curled his arm around Bucky's back and slid his hand into John's back pocket.

Chapter Notes

> and so, it ends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Someone's taken a rice bag from the Payne's mill," the Sheriff says to his Deputy when the latter walks through the station door.

It was midday, and with the Deputy still holding the door open the station was flooded with light. It had changed, recently. They'd knocked holes in two of the walls and now light streamed in endlessly, the shadows chased away by the sun. There were two desks now, and neither of them faced the lock-up bars that still lined the back of the building. Instead, they faced each other in the middle of the room, allowing the lawmen to get a full view of the station. It felt more pleasant that way. The mould was gone, had been scrubbed raw in the deep clean, and a cactus had been placed on the Deputy's desk.

"You want me to go and see?" The Deputy asks.

"Yessuh," The Sheriff replies, not even looking up from his paperwork.

The Deputy nods and spins on his heels.

"Deputy," Rosie calls after him before the door can swing shut. The Deputy catches the door with his hand, leans back in, turns to look over his shoulder. "Be nice."

Bucky grins, mischief gleaming in his eyes. "I'm always nice, Sheriff."

-

It had been three months since Sheriff Harding had been removed and Sheriff Rosenthal had taken his place, and the town of Lemmon, South Dakota was thriving.

The previous Sheriff hadn't gone easy.

He'd made a scene to rival all scenes, yelling and cursing and threatening on the doorstep of the station. Bucky and Gale had gone along with Rosie for support, and when Harding had started his shouting the townsfolk gathered like flies to witness the spectacle. Nash and various customers – including Mrs Payne and her sons, Crosby and Bubbles. Krank, Curt, Hambone, and Douglass had poured out the saloon like a shot of whiskey. The blacksmith had even brought out Meatball to join the affair, who was barking along, overjoyed to see so many people.

Looking at the sea of folks before him, at Rosie's calm demeanour and Bucky smirking like the devil over his shoulder, Harding had declared, "this is treason!"

Bucky had snorted at that and Gale had elbowed him in the side, biting back a smile.

Rosie simply held up the Governor's letter. "It's all right here. You calm down, and I'll let you read it."

At the command, Harding had turned crimson with rage.

"*Let* me? You *work* for me."

"Not anymore, by the sounds of it," Curt piped up.

"You wouldn't disobey a lawman, would you, *Mr* Harding?" Bucky had called out, feigning shock. He hardly knew the man, but he couldn't resist joining in on the fun. Curt caught his eye through the crowd and grinned.

Gale pressed his arm against his. When John looked across at the blonde beside him, he found him smirking.

I am gon like it here, Bucky had thought, fond.

The colour had drained from Hardin's face immediately. His eyes darted, from Rosie, to the wives, the husbands, the friends of everyone he had hung. He said nothing more. He swallowed thickly.

"You got till sundown to get out of my town," Rosie had said politely.

When dusk came, the Sheriff's station was empty. Nobody had seen Harding leave town, but everywhere they looked there'd been no sign of him.

“Like a damn ghost,” Gale had muttered.

The three men had stood in the station. Rosie had ran his hand lightly over the Sheriff’s desk. On it, lay a silver star. It was no different from the one he already wore, apart from the engraving etched into the front.

Bucky and Buck watched as Rosie unclipped his Deputy badge, and donned the Sheriff’s.

“How’s it feel?” Gale had asked.

Rosie had taken a deep breath and nodded slowly. “Heavy.”

“It’s crooked,” Bucky had teased, pointing to the badge. Gale had slapped his hand, and Bucky slapped his arm back.

Rosie frowned, looked down, rolled his eyes when he realised Bucky had lied. He’d ushered the two of them out, claiming he had work to do in his station.

Walking down the street, heading for home, Bucky had slung an arm over Gale’s shoulder. “I think I might like this new Sheriff.”

Gale looked at him and smiled, pleased. “Yeah?”

Bucky smiled back. “Yeah, but don’t tell him I said so.”

Gale curled his arm around Bucky’s back and slid his hand into John’s back pocket. The possessive action made Bucky run hot, made him want to shove Gale into the nearest alley and kiss him senseless.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Gale had promised.

It couldn’t be said if Harding would ever return, but his leaving had lifted the fog that had hung over Lemmon. People were no longer scared to commit crimes – not that crime was suddenly on the rise, the townsfolk liked Rosie, and felt no need – but if someone did happen to do something wrong, in an accident or a moment of rage, they owned up to their falsehoods easily. This meant a lot less innocent people were logged as having a record. Lock-up was a busier place, Rosie was stern but fair, and not a single noose had been weaved in three months.

-

“Howdy, boys,” Bucky says, sliding on up to the gate that surrounded

the Payne's mill.

Crosby and Bubbles, boys of 15 and 16 who had been laughing and chasing each other, stop running around and look over as the Deputy approaches. They stare. Bucky stares right on back.

Crosby turns and takes off running into the house.

A burst of laughter speeds up Bucky's throat, but he manages to choke it down, turning it into a clearing of the throat. The Sheriff had told him to be nice, and nice is what he'd be. He locks eyes with Bubbles.

Bucky smiles pleasantly, winks, and Bubbles sprints after his brother.

Alone, he chuckles softly. He didn't mind that they were scared of him. He'd been scared of Deputies too, until recent events and a certain blonde stablehand had changed his mind.

When Rosie had shown up one morning, the silver star in his hand and a question on his tongue, Bucky had laughed and laughed and laughed.

He'd said no.

Rosie had been disappointed, but understanding, and left them too it.

Gale spent the entire day trying to convince him to change his mind. It was all he spoke about; how good it would be for him to have something to do, how he'd be more sympathetic to people because of his history, how excellent of a shot he was if he needed to be.

Bucky, who had zero interest in upholding the law, had grown bored and irritated by Gale's constant pushing. He'd disappeared to Krank's, regret building the second he stepped foot out the door.

He just couldn't see it. He'd be a useless lawman, nobody would listen to him or respect him or *like* him the way they did Rosie. He'd cause more trouble than he was worth.

At Krank's saloon, he met a man named Friedkin, and the two of them quickly struck up a conversation. Friedkin was nice enough, Bucky didn't particularly care who he was talking to, as long as they kept buying him drinks.

He has absolutely no recollection of why Friedkin told him, but with a simple smile and a question from Bucky, the man had admitted to

stealing from Nash's store. Said he just wanted to make his daughter smile. Bucky had raised his eyebrows in surprise, sipped his drink, and shrugged.

"So?" He'd said.

"So," Friedkin had replied, scared, bouncing his leg, "the Sheriff will have me *hanged*. I'm gon be his first example."

Bucky snorted, shook his head, waved a relaxed, dismissive hand. "He ain't gon do that. He'll probably throw you in lock-up for a day or two, but, you seem sorry enough."

He drained the rest of his drink, tapped the rim of his glass with his finger for Krank to refill.

Friedkin looked him over, must have seen something he believed, for he said, "you really think so?"

Bucky downed his refilled drink like a shot and stood up. "Come on, I'll prove it."

To his surprise, Friedkin followed him all the way to the station. He kept up his easy demeanour, which was simple to do when he knew Rosie wasn't going to hurt the man.

Afterwards, when Friedkin was sitting in the cell, relieved and so very sorry, Rosie had slid the badge across the desk to Bucky. A silent offering.

"Why?" He asked. It hadn't occurred to him, the first time, that Rosie must have a reason for wanting him on his side.

Rosie shrugged. "People like you. You're charmin', easy to talk to. You know what it's like not to trust the law. I think people'll find that disarmin'."

Quips and jokes rose to meet him immediately, fighting to overpower the genuine curiosity in his chest. He wanted to laugh, wanted to say *you think I'm charmin'?* all shy like, just to tease. If Buck were here he would've. He'd have liked to watch his eyes roll as the corners of his mouth pinched up. Instead, he asks, "so I should be arrestin' folks?"

"It ain't about arrestin'," Rosie had said, "that's what everyone thinks, that's what Harding always got wrong. It's about protectin'. I think you're quite good at that."

Bucky had blinked, taken back. He'd looked down at the silver star on the desk, the way the light reflected like gold off it's surface. He'd picked it up and felt the weight of it in his hand, imagined what it might feel like hanging from his chest. He thought of Gale, of what he'd do to anyone who hurt the man, of what he'd do to keep him safe.

The answer, was anything.

Bucky had thrown the star up into the air, caught it when it landed, and walked away without a word.

When he'd got home, Buck had seen the badge in his hand, and whatever the blonde was going to say had died in his throat.

"Why?" He'd asked.

Bucky had shrugged. "I love you."

It was reason enough, and very, very, true.

(Later that night, Gale had whispered *please, Deputy* into the dark, and it had all seemed far more worth it.)

So here he was now, investigating stolen bags of rice. Not quite what he'd pictured when he'd accepted the job, but it was honest work, and he was quite proud of that.

Mrs Payne emerges from the house stationed a little ways from the mill and makes her way to the fence. She greets him with a gentle smile, and he returns it, nodding his head to her.

"Heard we got some missin' rice," he greets, friendly.

She directs him to the mill, to where they keep piles of the filled bags.

"Should be twelve, but I only count eleven," she explains.

Inside, Bucky counts them himself quickly. Rosie had said you started with the easy explanation first. When he, too, counts only eleven, he nods.

"I'll have a look around. You head back on in, wouldn't want you getting' cold out here," he says sweetly. Summer had come and gone, and Autumn was sinking it's teeth into the Earth.

Mrs Payne smiles, pats his shoulder, and disappears.

Looking around, there wasn't much to see. It didn't look like anyone had broken in, and none of the other bags had been touched. Rising in a steady height order, the bags were arranged to look like steps. Bucky almost thought they could be climbed. There was rice on the floor, scattered messily and trailing towards the door, but, he was in a rice mill, so he didn't jot that one down as evidence.

Muttering at the door catches his attention. He looks, just catches the glimpse of two heads ducking out of sight.

A criminal will often return to the scene of a crime, had been another of Rosie's pieces of advice.

Bucky creeps slowly closer towards the door. Whispered bickering grows louder.

"What we whisperin' bout?" Bucky says, sticking his head out the door.

The two boys were pressed against the side of the mill. When Bucky makes them jump, Crosby jolts, hitting his head on the wall.

John presses his lips together and tries not to laugh.

"We wasn't doin' nothin'!" Bubbles denies automatically.

Bucky nods, considering. "Yessuh, that is most certainly what an innocent person would say."

Crosby rubs the back of his head, frowning. "We *wasn't*."

"So, you don't know nothin' bout this missin' rice? Your mother's awful upset," Bucky tries. *Manipulative bastard*, a familiar voice in his head chides. He bites back a smile at the thought.

Guilt crosses their faces, clear as day. Bubbles' bottom lip trembles. Crosby looks at his brother, drops his hand back down to his side.

"We was playin'," Crosby says miserably. "The bag split, and…and…"

He sniffs, looks down at his shoes, presses grains of rice into the ground with the toe of his boot.

Bucky looks from one boy to the other. "That's it? It was an accident?"

They both nod.

“You gonna take us to jail?” Bubbles asks quietly.

The first response that comes to mind is *yes*. It’s a quick and cruel response, one that came from a desire for amusement, for them to keep being scared when the Deputy came knocking. But, a second, far more gentle answer begs to be chosen, and Bucky finds it rather convincing.

He’d learnt a lot, being with Gale.

He’d learnt he liked a steady hand, even a harsh one at times, but a gentle one at most.

Spending the days with Buck was like some kind of paradise, something they preached about in Church, something they said you’d only reach if you earnt it, if you deserved it. Bucky didn’t know what he’d done to deserve Gale Cleven, but he figures it must be something grand, and he was desperate to keep deserving him for as long as he was able.

The weight of Gale’s attention felt like being washed over by some holy thing. It made him want to fall to his knees, dig his hands in the cold dirt and pray for even a scrap of his divine light.

He felt like he’d spent so long in the dark that he didn’t know what to do with the sun, didn’t know how to act, how to think, how to speak. He was starved of it, and when Gale had found him in his stables it was like being truly fed for the first time. When Gale had laid his hands, gentle and healing on his ruined flesh, it had felt like a baptism in itself. Bucky had crossed his arms, held his breath, and fallen backwards. Head over heels.

Bucky *wants* to deserve him, and so he tries hard to earn the kind of goodness that Gale put out into the world.

“Course not,” he says gently. “It was an accident.”

The brothers glance at each other, wary, confused, like that didn’t make a difference. It hits too close to home and damn near breaks his fool heart.

“What you do with the rest?” He asks.

Crosby wipes the back of his hand across his nose. “Hid it.”

The messy trail of rice that lead to the door suddenly made a lot of

sense.

“Can you…unhide it?” He suggests. “I bet your mother could still use the remains.”

Crosby nods eagerly and then he’s grabbing his brother’s hand and pulling him from the mill. Bucky watches from the doorway as they run across the field, cut a left, and disappear from view.

He takes a slow stroll back towards the house, enjoying a breeze that passes through. He wonders what Gale was doing right now, if he was thinking the same about him. He hopes so.

Bucky knocks on the door.

Mrs Payne opens it immediately. “Find anythin’?”

“Yes ma’am.” He glances across to the mill, out of Mrs Payne’s view, where he could see two small figures carrying something between them towards the building. As he watches, one of them drops their side, followed by the other. They scramble to pick it back up. “I suspect you’ll see that bag again real soon.”

Mrs Payne frowns, confused, before stepping out of the house and following his gaze. She softens, sighs.

“Those boys…” she mutters.

“They mean well,” Bucky defends. “They was just scared.”

Their mother shakes her head. “They got no reason to be. Not anymore.” She turns back to him and smiles. “Thanks to you and the Sheriff, that is.”

Bucky smiles, warm and genuine. It was all he needed to hear.

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Late afternoon was setting in and there was a certain blonde Bucky was growing desperate to get back to.

First, business. Bucky pops into Rosie on his way past, tells him Mrs Payne was happy with his service.

Rosie looks up, raises an eyebrow.

“Were you nice to those boys?” He asks seriously.

A thought jumps to the front of his mind. He gives the Sheriff his most innocent smile and nods.

He says, “I was *real* rice.”

The look Rosie gives him is severely unimpressed. Bucky lets the joke hang in the air, exceptionally pleased with himself.

“Go home, Deputy,” the Sheriff commands, deadpan.

“Have a rice day!” The Deputy calls as he goes.

Home.

Bucky smiles at the thought.

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Gale Cleven was stood near the open stable door, holding the reigns of a horse.

He clicks his tongue, pulls on the reigns, and the horse doesn’t move an inch. He does this a second time and reaches the same result. On the third attempt, Buck tips his head back and mutters something to the sky.

Bucky watches for a moment longer, could stand here and watch him forever, but he’d much rather be standing by his side.

“You ain’t doin’ it right,” Bucky calls as he walks down the path.

Gale’s head looks in his direction immediately, a smile spreads across his face like spring.

“Your damn horse is stubborn,” he calls back.

Bucky grins.

“Nah.” He gets closer, runs a hand down the horses nose and takes the reigns from Buck’s hands. The horse, a grey American quarter horse Bucky had named Cheyenne, immediately starts to move as John leads him into the stables. “He just likes me more than you.”

Gale watches them go, shakes his head in silent disbelief.

Bucky leads Cheyenne to the box beside Boeing, the one he had claimed as his own all those days ago.

He'd christened the horse Cheyenne because of his unrelenting nature. He was fierce and uncompromising, as unforgiving as the river itself and Bucky loved him dearly. He understood, now, what Boeing meant to Buck.

Cheyenne was also where he and Gale spent a lot of their time.

When days were quiet and they'd used up every inch of their home, they took their horses and galloped straight for the river. To ride beside Gale, quick and hard, nothing chasing them but time was a precious thing.

They'd stop by the water, let their horses drink while they rolled in the soft green. There were a lot of grass stains in their clothes lately, a reminder of where they'd been and what they'd done. Bucky hoped with all of his heart that they never washed out.

"How am I supposed to train him if he only listens to you?" Gale asks, coming to stand beside him at the gate to the box.

"You don't," Bucky says simply, happily. He turns to Buck, reaches up and wipes a spot of dirt from his cheek with his thumb. "Let him be a wild thing."

Gale rolls his eyes, smiling. The motion sends delight down Bucky's spine. "*You're* a Goddamn wild thing."

"You love it," Bucky teases.

Buck sighs. "Yessuh, I do."

Bucky gasps, places a hand over his racing heart. He feels the beat of it steady, and strong, and in love, against his palm.

"Oh, Gale," he sighs, dreamily, "say it again."

Gale smiles, amused and adoring. He takes hold of Bucky's hand, tugs him close, kisses him sweetly, and does exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

thank u so so so so so much to every single one of u who interacted with this story in anyway. if u left kudos, a comment, a bookmark, or came to find me on tumblr, this story was written completely for u.

i had no idea it would get this kind of attention, and honestly, if it

hadn't, i can't say as much thought would have gone into it as it did. i wish u guys could see the pages and pages of scrawled ideas in my notebook for this fic, cos i really went hard with this one nd it was all down to ur support.

u've all been so nice and made my day with each lovely thing u've said. i feel truly blessed, and i hope this ending is good enough for what u all deserve.

im sure i'll write more of this pairing in the future, after i've mourned the loss of my yeehaw era, so stick around.

now im off to print out all of ur comments, and eat every single one.

End Notes

if you enjoyed leave a comment or come yell at me on tumblr @sig-nifier

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!